

# INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP



The Flight into Egypt Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, North Italy

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT MATTHEW  
TEACHER'S MANUAL



# INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP



## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW

### COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

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JAMES P. O'BRYAN, S.T.

ST. JOSEPH SOCIETY FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE WORD  
IRVINE, CALIFORNIA



**NIHIL OBSTAT: Rev. Raymond Skonezny, S.S.L.  
Censores Deputatus**

**IMPRIMATUR: +William R. Johnson  
Bishop of Orange in California**

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24 Boulder View  
Irvine, California 92603-8303**



## FOREWORD

This work, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, is part of a larger, seven-year Catholic Bible study, *Invitation to Christian Discipleship*. A second component of *The Gospel of St. Matthew* consists of a summary of lectures and worksheets designed for the student, published separately under the title of *The Light of the World*. This seven-year study has been developed for the Catholic laity so that the Word of Christ, rich as it is, dwells in them.

*Thus they will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depths of Christ's love, and experience this love that surpasses all knowledge so that they may attain the fullness of God himself.*  
(Eph. 3:18-19)

The general motivating force behind this study is the preservation and growth of the Christian Faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries. It has four immediate goals:

1. To ensure a true spirit of repentance;
2. To foster a deeper commitment in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ;
3. To create a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in believers; and
4. To encourage a more vibrant participation in the life and mission of the Church.

*Invitation To Christian Discipleship* has been accredited by the Catechetical Institute of the Diocese of Orange, California. It is now available to all parishes and at-home study groups. It is designed for a layperson to present.



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# THE GOSPEL OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST ACCORDING TO SAINT MATTHEW

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

There is only one Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and there are four inspired versions of the one Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Gospel means *good news*. It reveals the *good news* about the salvation of mankind. As Paul explains, "*I mean that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's transgressions against them (2 Cor. 5:19).*" The Gospel brings to us divine revelation. It reveals the love of God in Christ, and His work of universal salvation. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council describe this revelation in these words:

*In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Ch. I-1*

St. John the Evangelist describes this Christian Revelation in very experiential terms:

*This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched--we speak of the word of life. This life became visible: we have seen and bear witness to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life that was present to the Father and became visible to us. What we have seen*

*and heard we proclaim in turn to you so that you may share life with us. This fellowship of ours is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.* 1 Jn. 1:1-3

*By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ who is the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation.* Div. Rev. I-2

Through Christ we come not only to know God and experience salvation, but we encounter in Christ the fullness of revelation, because Christ is God Incarnated. The Church clearly rejects any claims to public revelation between the apostolic times and the Second Coming of Christ: "... we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (Div. Rev. I-4)."

Such a revelation is public by its very nature. It is intended for the salvation of all persons: It is a catholic revelation. "God our Savior," writes Paul, "wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth (1 Tim. 2:4-5)." Simultaneously, Paul proclaims this saving truth, "God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:5)."

God chose certain individuals called prophets and apostles to make known divine truth. This Divine Revelation, when revealed through the preaching of prophets and apostles, became Religious Tradition within the community. This Divine Revelation, when recorded by inspired scribes, became Holy Scripture within the community.

## INSPIRATION AND REVELATION

However, we must not deduce from the above that the entire written Bible is divine revelation. Much of what is written in the Scriptures concerns itself with the circumstances surrounding the revelation, and the effects and the reactions to God's revealed will. We will have no trouble if we bear in mind the distinction between revelation and inspiration. Revelation concerns those "*deepest truths about God and the salvation of man.*" The word *inspiration* comes from the Latin *inspirare* which means *to breathe into*. To say the Scriptures are *inspired* implies that the Holy Spirit of God, in some manner, influences these writings.

The Catholic Church, through the teaching of its bishops in council, confirms the divine inspiration of the Bible and defines the nature of inspiration. It clearly states that the "*divinely revealed realities*" contained in the Bible were written "*under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself (Div. Rev. III-11).*" By teaching how inspiration works within the human writer, the Church clarifies the nature of inspiration.

These inspired writers are truly the human authors of the Scriptures. Inspiration does not violate the human dignity of the inspired writers by reducing them to automatons--inspired robots. The men divinely chosen have talent and ability. God used and worked within their abilities and limitations to express those sacred truths He willed to reveal for the salvation of mankind. The human writer is so much himself--he is not "out of it"--that he too, is called the author of the inspired work. Nevertheless, God so worked within and through them that the inspired scribes wrote "*everything and only those things which He (God) wanted.*" The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council confirm:

*Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors, or sacred writers, must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.*

*Div. Rev. III-11*

This teaching is subtle and easily misunderstood. It clearly states that "*both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts ... (have) been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Ibid).*" However, it insists that inspiration is limited to "*that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.*" In other words, it is not the purpose or the intention of the sacred authors to teach anything but that sacred truth needful and useful for salvation--regardless of whatever literary means may be devised through which to express these truths. We are not to read more into the Scriptures than was intended by the Holy Spirit. Every word of the Sacred Scriptures is inspired, but not every inspired word is a divine revelation.

To think that the Bible teaches anything contrary to scientific certainties is to fail to understand what the Bible does teach. Writing upon this point, Saint



Augustine said that although the sacred writers may have known astronomy, the Holy Spirit did not intend to utter through them any truth apart from that which is profitable to salvation--matters concerning right faith and correct morals. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: "*Any knowledge which is profitable to salvation may be the object of prophetic inspiration. But things which cannot affect our salvation do not belong to inspiration.*" The Bible treats all matters—be they of natural science or political history--only insofar as these matters concern eternal salvation.

The Sacred Scriptures teach sacred truths and realities through varied literary forms such as prophecy, poetry and historic narrative, as well as other recognized literary forms such as apocalyptic. In other words, God not only used human beings as his instruments to reveal religious truths, but He likewise used those forms through which people normally communicate their thoughts and ideas. To know what God intended to communicate through the sacred writers--and actually did communicate through their writings--calls for proper interpretation of the Scriptures.

#### INTERPRETATION OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

A proper interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures seeks to know the literary meaning or sense of what was written. The literary sense of the Scripture is that sense actually *expressed* in the words used by the inspired human author, as well as that sense *intended* by the sacred writer. Therefore, a proper interpretation of the Scriptures seeks to know the meaning of the words *actually expressed* at that historical moment, and what the author *actually intended to express* in the words and literary forms used. Obviously, this is no simple task. Not only must the ancient usage of the language be understood, but equally important would be to take into consideration the circumstances and the culture in which the author lived and wrote.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught:

*The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred writer wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the*

*time of the sacred writer, and to customs men normally followed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another*  
Div. Rev. III-12

We must seek to go back at least nineteen hundred years to properly interpret the Sacred Writers. Take for example the importance of gematria (numerology) in ancient times. Each letter of the alphabet had its corresponding number. Messages could be expressed in letters or numbers. On one ancient wall was found inscribed, "*I love the girl whose number is 545.*" Numbers possessed symbolic meanings for the ancient people. For example, the number 4 referred to creation or to nature; the number 10, and multiples of it, could express indefiniteness or even infinity; and the number 12 expressed fullness and completeness. It was customary to use 40 to express an indefinite or unknown period of natural time: forty years or forty days expressed an unknown number of years or days. To say, in ancient days, that a man lived to be 110 or 120 years of age, implied that he lived a full and complete life. Indeed, the past is the past, and is different from the present. The past must be permitted to give its own account. The ancient writers and their world must be understood if the full message of the Sacred Scriptures is to shine forth. This demands much scholarship and research.

Great work has been done by scholars, both past and present. As an effect of the work already accomplished, we have witnessed a renaissance--a new birth of interest--in the study of the Sacred Scriptures. The sacred realities sealed within the Scriptures have rarely, if ever, shone forth brighter.

But mistakes have been made by scholars. Some scholars could not distinguish between the facts revealed by research and their interpretation of those facts. It has been the role of the Church to point out when facts have been interpreted wrongly. Scholars have not always prudently appreciated this ministry. However, on the other hand, as one scholar observed:

*Yet true critical studies demand a humble submission to evidence and a willingness to accept truth no matter where it may be found ... To fear the new knowledge and to hide from it is-a "denial of faith, for "the refusal to face facts in the name of piety is not the evidence of faith but of the lack of it.*  
Raymond E. Brown

Since all Scripture is inspired of God who is "the Holy Spirit of Truth," and "since God is a God, not of confusion, but of peace," there exists a unity and

harmony among the Scriptures. There can be no contradiction between the sacred truths revealed. Hence one of the most valid principles for proper interpretation has been that the best interpreters of the Scriptures are the Scriptures themselves.

Any interpretation of a passage from the Scriptures must be seen in the light of the entire revelation. It must be reflected against the background of the entire Scriptures. For example, we read in Exodus 33:11, "*The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another.*" In the next verse we read that the Lord says to Moses, "*You are my intimate friend ... You have found favor with me.*" The most literal interpretation of those words would be that Moses looked upon the face of God. This seems to be plainly stated in the text. Furthermore, a relationship of friendship and intimacy appears to substantiate such an interpretation. However, this is not what the author intended. We only have to read further, and we know that the author never intended this interpretation, even though his previous words seemed to imply it. In verse twenty of the same chapter, we read that the Lord said to Moses, "*But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives.*" Often, we must not only read other verses of the text, but other sacred books to maintain the harmony which rightly belongs in divine revelation.

There is another consideration that must be taken into account for a proper interpretation of the Scriptures. Jesus made certain promises to the Church He established. These promises are recorded in the Scriptures. For example, Jesus said to the Church:

*The jaws of death shall not prevail against it.* *Mt. 16:18*

*I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you always: the Spirit of Truth ... This much have I told you while I was still with you; the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will instruct you in everything, and remind you of all that I told you.* *Jn. 14:16, 25-26*

*When he comes, however, being the Spirit of truth he will guide you to all truth.* *Jn. 16:13*

We know, therefore, that there is harmony between the divine realities and truths taught, both in the Scriptures and within the Church. For anyone's interpretation of Scripture to be proper, it must be in harmony with the



teaching of the Church concerning matters of faith and morals. The Bible does not claim to be the fullness of divine revelation. The Church proclaims Jesus Christ to be the fullness of divine revelation. Christ remains with the Church and guides it through his Holy Spirit. In the last written gospel account, we read:

*Jesus performed many other signs as well--signs not recorded here--in the presence of his disciples. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life in his name.*

*Jn. 20:30-31*

As we can see from the testimony of John, the written Gospel is a help to our faith. The Church is also an indispensable help. John goes on to tell us:

*There are still many other things that Jesus did, yet if they were written about in detail, I doubt there would be room enough in the entire world to hold the books to record them.*

*Jn. 21:25*

What the world could not contain, the Holy Spirit does. Through the Holy Spirit, the Church possesses the complete treasure of revelation. It acknowledges this Holy Spirit to be "*the living voice of the gospel*" in the Church. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote:

*The Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the gospel resounds in the Church, and, through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them.*

*Div. Rev. II-9*

Because of the above truths, the Church holds that a proper interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures must be in harmony, not only with the rest of the Scriptures, but also with the traditional teachings of the Church. Since the Holy Spirit is the author of both, there is harmony between the revealed elements of faith. "*Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church (Div. Rev. II-10).*" This led the bishops of the Second Vatican to teach:

*But since the Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole*

*Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.*

*Div. Rev. III-12*

One theologian was led to make this interesting observation:

*There is not a single dogma which the Church holds by Scripture alone, nor a single dogma which it holds by Tradition alone.*

*Yves Congar*

The Church has a commission from Christ and is empowered by Him to carry out His mandate to her:

*Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name "of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world.*

*Mt. 28:18-20*

Accepting the full responsibility of its commission, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed its authority as the ultimate and final teacher of revelation and interpreter of the Sacred Scriptures:

*For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.*

*Div. Rev. III-12*

The Church has rejected, at times, the scriptural interpretations of certain theologians and scholars, as their teachings seemed to be contrary to--and corruptive of--the revelation received by the Church, preserved and guarded by her. However, we must not think that this guarding hand of Church authority rests heavily upon Biblical interpretation. It seems that the Church has reserved for herself, and definitely interpreted, only seven passages out of the entire Bible. This interpretation is no longer open to questioning by the faithful: in each case it is in defense of traditional doctrine and morals. (These

are the seven passages: John 3:5, 20:22, 20:23; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24; Rm. 5:12; and James 5:14.) Indeed, church authority is cautious, and rightly so! It holds a treasure in earthen vessels.

In summation, what may we say is the attitude of the Catholic Church concerning the Scriptures in general, and the place Scriptures hold in the Catholic Faith? The Scriptures express, in human language, a message of salvation--delivered by God--to the human race. Since it was written many centuries ago, it is a message encased in dead letters that need interpretation, and must be made "living and effective" by the Spirit of God. Prayer must accompany the reading and studying of Scriptures. Unless the Holy Spirit enlightens the reader or student, the effort becomes--in the words of St. Jerome--as effective as stones skipping across a frozen pond. Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures do not reveal their depths, nor serve up that food which gives life and nourishment to the spirit.

The Church teaches that divine revelation demands no less than "the obedience of faith," which consists of a "full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals." The faithful Christian not only believes the truths revealed, but is guided in everyday life by those truths. Such faith puts absolute trust in God's Word; it does not demand signs and wonders. The Word of God is sufficient. For the Catholic Church the Scriptures are the recorded rule of faith, which cannot be changed.

The Church should grow in the understanding of the Scriptures, but it can never deny or falsify them. It will never do so! What distinguishes Catholics from many other Christians is that, for the Catholic Church, both the Bible and the Sacred Tradition are the supreme rule of faith. There can be no contradiction between the two. We have already noted that the Catholic Church possesses the ministry and the power to interpret authoritatively divine revelation, whether it is oral or written. The bishops of the Second Vatican Council teach:

*The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life ... She has always regarded the Scriptures together with sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so. For, inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without*



*change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life.*

*Div. Rev. VI-21*

When we say that divine revelation recorded in the Scriptures cannot be changed, this is not to imply Christian revelation to be static, ossified or petrified. The word of God is "living and effective." As the Church teaches:

*For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.*

*Div. Rev. 11-8*

#### THE FOUR GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

Concerning the four gospel accounts in particular, the Church gives them a position of pre-eminence within the Bible, and speaks of them as "*the foundation of faith.*" The four gospel accounts are a product of the revelation received by the twelve Apostles from Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Apostles preached this revelation first in the world, and the Christian community conserved it correctly. The Church attributes the four written gospel accounts both to the Apostle's and to apostolic men such as Mark and Luke. Regarding the four written gospels, the Second Vatican Council taught authoritatively:

*The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John ... The four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up to heaven.*

*Div. Rev. V-18,19*

As for the actual composition of the four gospel accounts, there has been much discussion and debate among biblical scholars. From the teachings of the Vatican Council, we deduce that the Church acknowledges that both oral and written records existed previously to the composition of the four Gospels. Since these accounts were not written at the same time, it is possible that a previously written gospel account could have been available to another sacred writer--as well as other written sources. Some scholars believe Matthew possessed a copy of Mark. Others think Mark possessed a copy of Matthew's Gospel account. There is another theory that maintains there was an independent written source available to Matthew, Mark and Luke. Nevertheless, from the material available to the sacred writers--both oral and written--they selected the one most suited for their purpose. They rejected some of the available material, and they reduced and synthesized some of it. The Church insists, however, that these techniques of composition in no way falsify their presentation of the divine revelation. The Second Vatican Council states it in this fashion:

*The authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation but always in such a fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus.*

*Div. Rev. V-19*

Biblical scholars generally agree that an analysis of the contents of the gospels reveals the existence of smaller literary units such as miracle stories, parables, and accounts of the passion and resurrection narratives. These literary units existed within the Christian Community and were passed on through the preaching and teaching ministries within the Church. Because of a need to preserve the apostolic teachings within the churches, these began to be compiled and joined together in written accounts--ultimately resulting in the present four gospel accounts. Luke himself gives us some insight as to the composition of his gospel account. He writes:

*Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events which have been fulfilled in our midst, precisely as those events were transmitted to us by the original eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. I too have carefully traced the whole sequence of events from the beginning, and have decided to set it in writing for you, Theophilus, so that Your Excellency may see how reliable the instruction was that you received.*

*Lk. 1:1-4*

He wrote in Acts:

*In my first account, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus said and taught until the day he was taken up to heaven, having first instructed the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit.*

*Acts.1:1-2*

When we study the four gospel accounts, we note a sharp similarity between the material found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. In fact, of the 1068 verses in Matthew, 606 of these are found in Mark, which altogether has only 661 verses. This leaves 55 verses in Mark not found in Matthew. However, of these 55 verses, 31 are found in Luke's account: This leaves only 24 verses in the gospel account of Mark not found in either Matthew or Luke. Likewise there is a striking similarity in the vocabulary--over 50 percent of the vocabulary used by Mark appears in Matthew and Luke.

All three of these authors follow very closely the same order of events in the life of Jesus. All this has led some people to maintain that Mark's account is a summary of Matthew's or Luke's. Others hold that Mark's was the foundation gospel account upon which Matthew and Luke built. These three gospel accounts are called the Synoptic Gospels because of the similarity between them. This similarity is also referred to as the Synoptic problem. As an answer to this problem we have theories, but not the solution. As mentioned earlier, this similarity has been explained by a theory that points to the existence of an independent source available to all three authors, and that two or maybe three of the sacred authors possessed a copy of the first written gospel account. Nevertheless, these four evangelists did use that material available to them to present a theological understanding of Jesus Christ for that Christian Community for which they wrote. In order to present this material logically, the sacred writers followed a pattern of presentation already accepted within the Church. The Jesus presented in these four gospel accounts is indeed the Jesus perceived by the early Church.

One biblical scholar has wisely observed:

*One can no longer contrast belief in the Gospel with belief in the Church, for the Gospels themselves came out of the Church. If they had their origins in the preaching and teaching of the Apostles and were constructed of units preserved and formed into shape by the local Christian churches, this means that those who base their faith*



*on the Christ of the Gospels are really basing their faith on what the early Church taught about Christ. From Pentecost on, it has been impossible to approach Christ except through the Church's preaching.*

*Raymond E. Brown*

## THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

With this foundation, let us now proceed and reflect upon St. Matthew's gospel and the account credited to him. Matthew first appeared on the historical scene in the gospel as a government employee of King Herod Antipas working for the office of internal revenue. He held the lucrative position, yet unpopular task, of collecting tax money. He worked within the district of Galilee, out of Capernaum, by the Sea of Galilee--the same port in which Peter, James, and John kept their boats. Being a tax collector, or a publican, was a meticulous and exacting job; it however afforded an enterprising person many opportunities to gain personal wealth. At that time, such offices were purchased from the government. It was left to the tax collector to get back his money and his profit.

To work in such a position, in an area as Galilee, demanded a fluent knowledge of both Aramaic and Greek. Isaiah spoke of this area as the Galilee of the Gentiles. There were large Hellenistic colonies in the district and along the Sea of Galilee. These publicans--or tax collectors--were most especially obnoxious to the Jews. They were looked upon as being in the service of a foreign power, working against the good of their own people. Since their work kept them constantly in touch with the Gentiles, they remained in a perpetual state of ritual impurity. They were, socially and religiously, excommunicated Jews. As sinners, they were assimilated with harlots and pagans.

Matthew gives this account of his call to discipleship:

*As he moved on, Jesus saw a man named Matthew at his post where taxes were collected. He said to him: "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed him.*

*Mt. 9:9*

The name Matthew comes from the Aramaic, *mattai*, a shorter form of the Hebrew *Mattanyah*, which means *gift of Yahweh*. Jesus would teach that no one comes to Him unless the Father draws him. Evidently, Matthew was a gift to Jesus from the Father. However, the other disciples may have looked upon

Matthew's membership in the company as anything but a "gift." His presence within the group certainly did not elevate them in the eyes of the local society. Mark gives us this account of the call:

*Another time, while he went walking along the lakeshore, people kept coming to him in crowds and he taught them. As he moved on he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus at his tax collector's post, and said to him, "Follow me." Levi got up and became his follower.*

*Mk. 2:13-14*

Both Mark and Luke refer to Matthew as "Levi." Some have suggested that there was a name change because Matthew had such a bad reputation under his old name. However, we know that name changing was not uncommon, and it often denoted a complete change of life and personality. Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter, and called James and John, "Sons of thunder." The name "Levi" has an interesting origin, and calling Matthew "Levi" may be quite symbolic. On the basis of its derivation from the root *lwy*, it means *to accompany*. Levi is explained as referring to those who joined the Israelites at the time of their Exodus from Egypt, or to those who rallied to Moses when the rest of the Israelites had worshiped the golden calf. In the account Luke gives, he adds this statement: "*Leaving everything behind, Levi stood up and became his follower (Lk. 5:28).*" It is a story of a complete conversion. Luke goes on to say:

*After that Levi gave a great reception for Jesus in his house, in which he was joined by a large crowd of tax collectors and others at dinner.*

*Lk. 5:29*

Apparently, Matthew introduced as many sinners as possible to Jesus. The Scriptures relate that the Pharisees were scandalized by Jesus' associates which, in their minds, confirmed his own sinfulness. To their criticism, Jesus replied, "*The healthy do not need a doctor; sick people do. I have not come to invite the self-righteous to a change of heart, but sinners (Lk. 5:31-32).*" The name "Matthew" appears in all four enumerations of the Twelve Apostles, but only in Matthew's account do we read "*Matthew, the tax collector.*" Obviously he was profoundly impressed that God, in Jesus, could love and call anyone like himself to be an apostle.

Early Church records and tradition confirm that Matthew the Apostle wrote the first of the four inspired gospel accounts. By the beginning of the second

century, the Gospel attributed to Matthew was accepted in Antioch and Rome, which were important Christian centers. We find allusions to this in Clement of Rome's letter to the Corinthians (c. 95 A.D.), in the Epistle to Barnabas (c. 100 A.D.), Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Smyrnaeans (between 95 to 115 A.D.), in the Didache (c. 100 A.D.). Our earliest written reference comes from Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis, around 125 A.D., "*Matthew wrote an ordered account of the oracles (logia) in the Hebrew tongue, and each interpreted those oracles according to his ability.*"

It was understood by subsequent writers, such as Irenaeus and Eusebius that Papias was referring to the written gospels as "*the oracles.*" Writing around 170 A.D., Irenaeus gives this account of the authors of the four inspired gospels:

*Matthew wrote a version of the Gospel for the Hebrews in their own tongue, at the time that Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel and founding the Church at Rome. After the death of these, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us the things which were preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, wrote down in a book the Gospel which was preached by him. Finally John, the disciple of the Lord, who reclined on his breast, published his Gospel while he was residing at Ephesus. Nor are there more than these, nor again can you find fewer than these Gospels.*

*Adv. Haer. III, 1,1*

Origen, writing around 233 A.D., said that it was a truth rooted in tradition that the Apostle and publican Matthew wrote the first gospel in Hebrew characters for converted Jews. This was commonly accepted within the next century, as seen from the testimonies of Cyril of Jerusalem and Epiphanius.

St. Jerome wrote, around 400 A.D.:

*Matthew, also called Levi, first a publican and later an apostle, was the first to commit to writing the gospel of Christ; he wrote in Aramaic; it was later translated into Greek, but the translator is unknown.*

When the authors spoke of *Hebrew*, it has been understood that they referred--not to the classical Hebrew of antiquity--but to Aramaic, the mother tongue of the Palestinian people of apostolic times.

If Matthew wrote in Aramaic for a Palestinian community, it would have been previous to 70 A.D. Between the years 66 to 70 A.D., during the war between Jews and Romans, most Palestinian Christians would have fled or been destroyed. As already noted, Irenaeus places its composition prior to 68 A.D. Those who support this theory would place the writing of the Gospel in Jerusalem. Those who argue for a date after 70 A.D., suggest Antioch in Syria as the place of composition. Many Christian Jews sought refuge in that city. There would have been a Christian community in Antioch to which such a gospel could have been addressed. However, it would have had to be written in Greek.

Despite the testimony of antiquity, the existence of an original Aramaic version is denied by many modern scholars, mainly on the grounds that the Greek version of Matthew--which we possess--is manifestly not a translation from Aramaic. It is commonly held by scholars today to have been originally written in Greek by an unknown author--probably in Antioch, around 85 A.D. However, many do not accept this theory.

In all fairness to modern scholarship, it still must be said that the evidence presented by them is insufficient to reject the traditional Christian belief. They draw statements of certitude out of uncertain premises, as scholars like Lagrange have demonstrated. A great deal is really being *assumed* by these men, and it appears that we are to accept assumptions as certainties.

As long as people are assuming things, we could certainly assume that a man with Matthew's background was capable of writing first in Aramaic, for a Palestinian community, a gospel account that was lost or destroyed in the upheaval of wars which devastated Judea. Later Matthew was certainly capable of writing--if you would have it--in Antioch, a Greek version of his Aramaic Gospel, without the necessity of a translation from the Aramaic to the Greek.

It is interesting to note in passing that the Gospel attributed to Matthew is the one which speaks the most about money matters. He mentions money twelve times. He speaks more about coins and uses financial terms more often than the authors of the other gospels--38 times compared with 8 times in Mark and

twice in John. With such a background in finance, you would have expected to find Matthew treasurer for the company of disciples. Evidently, they trusted Judas Iscariot more than a converted publican.

Regarding the authorship of this Gospel, I find the present evidence of scholars to be insufficient. Therefore, I continue to support the traditional teaching that Matthew, the Apostle and publican, wrote an inspired gospel account known today as the Gospel of St. Matthew.

### THE INTENTION OF MATTHEW

There is little disagreement among biblical scholars over the purpose for which Matthew wrote: he wrote to assist a people who were making a spiritual transition from being Jews to being Christians. It was a time of traumatic change in faith for them. That Christianity of which James spoke of to Paul when he said, "*You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have come to believe, all of them staunch defenders of the law (Acts 21:20)*"--Christians who still followed Moses and the customs of the ancients and circumcised their children--that Christianity was coming to an end or had already done so.

If Matthew wrote before the fall of Jerusalem, he wrote for a people who were members of what would be seen as a Jewish sect that accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah--a group called "*Nazarenes.*" As the Acts of the Apostles teaches, this community underwent religious persecution rather early in its existence--their chief persecutor being St. Paul himself, who acted with the authorization of the high priests. The ordinary people may have tolerated these Nazarenes, and even admired them, but the religious leaders and the zealots did not. The deaths of Stephen and James, and the attempts upon the lives of Peter and Paul give proof of this.

If Matthew wrote after the fall of Jerusalem, he wrote for a Jewish Christian community that had to face the end of temple worship and a religious life and a Judaism they knew; for a group of people who found themselves being forcefully excluded from synagogue worship and being attacked as heretics for their faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Moses was recognized as the great law-giver of the Old Testament. Israel accepted Moses as the mediator between Yahweh and the Chosen People. Moses taught that the laws given through him would be-transitory--lasting for a time. However, these laws would retain the forces of divine law until



Yahweh would send another prophet like Moses. Israel must heed this New Moses. Those who refused would be cut off from the people of God. We read in Deuteronomy:

*A prophet like me wills the Lord, your God, rise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen ... And the Lord said to me, "This was well said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him. If any man will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it."*  
Deut. 18:15,17-19

Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth to his readers as the kingly son of David and the New Prophet foretold by Moses, a prophet superior to Moses. He presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Matthew emphasizes particularly that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Scholars recognize five distinct discourses and divisions within this Gospel presentation: Chapters Five through Seven; Ten; Thirteen; Eighteen; and Twenty-four through Twenty-five. They recognize these five divisions as symbolic representations of the five books of the Old Testament: the Torah. Matthew pictures Jesus delivering His greatest discourse from a mount. He deliberately seeks to evoke the image of Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Law from Yahweh. Matthew suggests a new revelation from God through Jesus Christ. He presents Jesus as delivering six antitheses--*It was said ... but I say*. In so doing, he demonstrates that Jesus possessed an authority superior to Moses', and that Jesus himself was superior to the Mosaic Law. By His own authority he makes and changes divine laws. Likewise, the superiority of Jesus' teaching is manifested: the changes demanded by Jesus call men to a higher level of holiness. The holiness and the perfection of the Heavenly Father become the pattern for human holiness.

Scholars agree, and history confirms that the genius of Matthew lay in this unique presentation of the teachings of Jesus. Matthew compresses the thought of Jesus into bullet-like quality carrying an explosive force upon impact. It is not without reason that the most quoted sayings of Jesus, in the present and in the past, come from the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew presents Jesus as a Person possessing extraordinary power. He follows a certain recognized pattern in the presentation of miraculous deeds: a

person is introduced; the request made and Jesus' response; its effect and how it affects the crowd or the witnesses. One author observed that these miracles have the appearance of being removed out of time and space, and create the impression of an in-break of heavenly power into an earthly situation.

Matthew confines the personal ministry of Jesus to Israel. Jesus is sent to Israel as the Messiah. Israel recognizes Jesus as the Messiah but rejects Him. Matthew does not excuse Israel which, by rejecting the Messiah, has cut itself off from the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom that was to have been inherited by Israel now will be given to the Gentiles. In Matthew, the coming of the Magi symbolizes that the Gentiles will be the first to worship Christ. Jesus appears in the Gospel with respect for the law and the authority of Israel. However, when this authority rejects the authority of the Messiah, the power of the kingdom passes out of the hands of Israel.

Matthew's originality has been noted in that he identifies the kingdom of heaven with the Church on earth. In the parables recounted in 13:24-30, 36-44, 47-50, it is made clear that the Church--the kingdom of God--is a visible society upon this earth, of which the present disciples are members. It is a hierarchical society, and its future governing body is revealed in Chapter Eighteen.

When it is all said and done, from the opening scene in his gospel account, Matthew has been moving his readers towards the final presentation of the Risen Christ upon the mountaintop. There his disciples have been summoned to hear his final proclamation: "*All power in heaven and earth has been given to me!*" Hearing, they will believe, and "*leaving everything behind*" they answer when he calls, "*Come follow me!*"

## CHAPTER 2

### NATIVITY OF THE MESSIAH

The Gospel account of St. Matthew begins with a declaration proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah of Israel: "*A family record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham (Mt. 1:1).*" When ancient Hebrew scholars in Alexandria translated the inspired Scriptures into the Greek language, they transcribed *Masiah* meaning *anointed one*, as *Christos. Masiah*, or *Christ* as translated in English, is a most important concept, both in the Old and in the New Testaments.

In order to understand better the Gospel of Matthew, let us briefly review the concept of *Christ*, or *Masiah*, as it appeared in the teachings of Israel. The theology concerning the *Masiah*—or the Messiah—developed slowly among the Chosen People, coming to full bloom only in New Testament times. We find a basic understanding of the concept of the Messiah expressed in Genesis 3:15:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel.*

The Scripture essentially describes in this text the basic conflict between good and evil, in which God proclaims a triumph of good over evil. The evil and the good find embodiment in the Ancient Serpent (later identified in Wisdom as Satan), and also in the Offspring of the Woman who is the Messiah. God will achieve this victory over evil as He proclaims: "*I will put enmity between you and the woman ... and her offspring.*"

In the Garden of Eden episode, the Scriptures explain the origin of sin on earth and its enslaving power over mankind. Amidst this dark picture of mankind's sin and Satan's triumph, God's revelation rekindles a light of hope for the world. This revelation introduces in the Bible the concept of salvation. As the history of salvation unfolds within Israel, so do also the theology and understanding of the Messiah.

Such concepts as *save*, *salvation*, and *savior* have their root in a word, *ys*, in the Hebrew language that implies being *unrestrained*, *freed*, *to have plenty of room*. This concept often appears as the opposite—or as the antithesis—of another word, *srr*, whose root in Hebrew signifies *stringent*, *restricted*. In the Hebrew language, the opposite of *salvation* carries more the idea of being imprisoned, enslaved, or confined within a narrow environment.

*Salvation* signifies being freed from all fetters and restraints. A *saved* bird flies freely through the air and the *saved* fish receives the sea in which to swim. In a word, we can say that salvation means *freedom*, whether it be of body or spirit, and the lack of salvation implies *imprisonment*, whether it be of body or spirit. We may say that salvation is the freedom to be what one has the power of being. The Hebrew verb *hosia* expresses the concept of *being saved*. It actually implies *to take out of a tight spot*, *to help or rescue*. It would be a saving act to release a bird from a cage so it could fly into the sky. When used in a military sense *hosia* means *to win a victory*. That person who achieves the freedom of another—or wins the victory—is called, in Hebrew, *mosia*. A *mosia* is a victorious leader—a savior.

English words such as *save*, *salvation*, and *savior* find their roots in the Greek words *sozein*, *soteria*, and *soter*. In the Greek language *soter*—meaning *savior*—was applied to men who rendered great public service, especially through victory in war. Alexander the Great was *soter*. The Roman emperors were often called *savior*. Even though the earlier New Testament Scriptures speak of salvation and of *being saved*, they rarely use *savior* in reference to Jesus Christ. This is probably due to the common usage of the term at that time. However, we know that John does speak of Jesus—through the words of the Samaritan woman—as *the Savior of the world*. We read in I Timothy 1:15 “*that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*” Luke identifies sinners as the “*lost*” whom Jesus seeks and saves. In the Gospels, the act of being healed is often connected with the idea of *being saved*. There is no doubt that the visible power to physically heal—to free from physical infirmity—signifies Jesus’ unseen power to save mankind from sin—to free them from moral infirmity.

The Old Testament presents Yahweh as the *Mosia* of Israel. The Scriptures present Israel’s exodus from Egypt as Yahweh’s mighty act of salvation. Salvation comes from Yahweh, both to the nation of Israel and to individuals. The Will of God to save Israel finds roots in the covenant promises made between Yahweh and Israel. Therefore, the salvific Will of

God is rooted in His own faithfulness and righteousness. Likewise, divine salvation finds roots within the spirits of the people saved. Faith is a precondition for salvation. We see in the New Testament that miraculous deeds followed acts of faith in Jesus. We find in Psalm 91 one of the finest expressions of the theology of salvation:

*Say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust" ... Because he clings to me, I will deliver him; I will set him on high because he acknowledges my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in distress; I will deliver him and glorify him; with length of days I will gratify him and will show him my salvation.* Ps. 91:2,14-16

Regarding Christian Revelation, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council teach:

*For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.* Div. Rev. II-8

We may say that the same is true about revelation in the Old Testament. Not only did the divine plan of salvation slowly unfold in prophecy, but the understanding of these revelations grew until they reached their fulfillment in Christ, and with the apostles as they grasped the fullness of the plan of salvation as it unfolded in Jesus Christ.

Before we begin our study of this gospel, let us look at the Old Testament background against which this gospel account will be presented. Israel first perceived her own role in the drama of salvation as being a descendant of Abraham. Yahweh made a promise to Abraham and entered into a covenant relationship with him. God said to Abraham: "*All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you (Gen. 12:3).*" Many centuries later, Paul gave a Christian interpretation to those very words. Paul told the Galatians:

*There were promises spoken to Abraham and to his "descendant." Scripture does not say "and to your descendants," as if it applied to many, but as if it applied only to one, "and to your descendant;" that is, to Christ.* Gal. 3:16



After Israel's exodus experience from Egypt and the covenant established with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai, Israel became consciously aware of her own role in the divine plan of salvation. Through the mouth of the pagan prophet Balaam, Yahweh confirmed the mysterious destiny of Israel. Looking down upon the nation of Israel, Balaam said:

*The utterance of one who hears what God says ... I see him, though not now; I behold him, though not near; a star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel .. Israel shall do valiantly, and Jacob shall overcome his foes. Num. 24:16-19*

Israel and Jacob are synonymous in this prophecy. In the Old Testament a *star* could symbolize a divine or angelic being or a human being especially endowed with the divine spirit. This prophecy could be interpreted to mean that a great leader and warrior will rise out of Israel. Later, the spirit of prophecy pinpoints the tribe of Judah to assume a position of leadership in Israel. Jacob gave this testament before his twelve sons:

*You, Judah, shall your brothers praise....the sons of your father shall bow down to you....The scepter shall never depart from Judah, or the mace from between his legs.... Gen. 49:8,10*

David, son of Jesse, the great king of Israel, sprang from the tribe of Judah.

In the history of the Chosen People, a time came when Israel demanded to be ruled by a king, and Yahweh agreed. In ancient times, the king was the person who represented the people and in whom the people were represented. The king was the corporate symbol of the nation—one person who represented many persons. Through their king, the people acted as a political body. The role of a king in history was not distinct from the historic role of his people. With the rise of a monarchy within Israel, the divine destiny of the Chosen People became integrated with that of the House of David.

As Israel grew into a nation, it viewed more and more the salvific power of Yahweh as being centered in the king of Israel. The king experienced God's salvation in a special way, thereby becoming a channel of God's saving power for His people, especially through victory in war. As political and social disasters came upon Israel, the Prophets kept hope alive through the promise that God would intervene through a special mediator--a

mediator that would bring victory and freedom to God's people. However, since disaster resulted from sin and Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant promises, this expected salvation would be conceived also as freedom from sin, and from the moral and social disorder that accompanies sin.

Israel recognized its ideal king in King David. The belief grew and developed—nourished by prophecy—that salvation would come through an intermediary, a *mosia* of Israel, who would be a descendant of David. He would not only save Israel, but establish the reign of God on earth. This introduces the concept of the Messiah, and of the Messianic Kingdom he will establish. As already mentioned, the word *messiah* or *christ* means *anointed one*. Any king or high priest of Israel would have been an *anointed one*—a *christ*—but with this development within the messianic doctrine of salvation, the word *messiah* increasingly signified the descendant of David who would save Israel and establish the *reign of God* on earth. The people of God put their hope in the Messiah—the Holy One to come.

Subsequent prophecies confirmed and clarified this expectation. The destiny of Israel would be fulfilled within and through the destiny of the House of David. The royal Psalms proclaimed the divine prediction of David. We read:

*I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: The Lord said to me, "You are my son; this day I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will give you the nations for an inheritance and the ends of the earth for your possession."*  
Ps. 2:7-8

*You love justice and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellow kings.*  
Ps. 45:8

The prophet Nathan foretold the eternal destiny decreed for the Davidic dynasty. Nathan said to David:

*The Lord also reveals to you that he will establish a house for you. And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins, and I will*

*make his kingdom firm. It is he who shall build a house for my name ... Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me: your throne shall stand firm forever. 2 Sam. 7:11-13,16*

Prophecy began to center upon the heir of David. We read in Psalm 72:

*O God, with your judgment endow the king, and with your justice, the king's son ... May he rule from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth ... The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Sheba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay him homage, all nations shall serve him.*

These words are attributed to King David:

*The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool ... Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in holy splendor: before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you." Ps. 110:1,3*

These words of Scripture were seen as applying to the Messiah. Jesus later used them in his teaching to suggest that Israel was mistaken about the true nature of the Messiah. We read in Mark:

*As Jesus was teaching in the temple precincts he went on to say: "How can the scribes claim, 'The Messiah is David's son'? David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.' If David himself addresses him as 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" Mk. 12:35-37*

Here, of course, we are ahead of ourselves. Only with Jesus did the revelation concerning the Messiah come to fullness.

As the monarchy itself deteriorated within Israel, an awareness began to grow that an ideal king would come who would terminate the line of David and establish the kingdom of Yahweh on earth. The prophet Isaiah chastised Ahaz, a descendant of David, who no longer believed in the promises made. Isaiah proclaimed that God was still with the House of David. He said to Ahaz:

*Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary men, must you also weary my God? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.*  
Is. 7:13-14

It was the prophets that kept the hope alive in Israel that God would fulfill his promises to them through the House of David. These prophecies began to define the nature of the Messiah and the kingdom to be established through him. Isaiah writes:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone ... For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!*

The prophet Micah pinpoints the Messiah's place of birth, and speaks quite mysteriously about his origin:

*But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from old, from ancient times ... He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord, his God; And they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.*  
Micah 5:1,3

The universal mission of Israel through the Messiah is now beginning to unfold and to be understood. To Israel, Isaiah makes this hopeful promise:

*But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse ... On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious ... He shall raise a signal to the nations and gather the outcasts of Israel; The dispersed of Judah he shall assemble from the four corners of the earth.*  
Is. 11:1,10,12

(Jesse was the father of David.)

At the time of Israel's exile, the prophets began to conceive of the Messiah as a spiritual return of David. We read in Ezekiel:

*I will appoint one shepherd over them to pasture them, my servant David; he shall pasture them and be their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.*  
Ez. 34:23-24

*They shall live on the land ... where their fathers lived ... with my servant David their prince forever.*  
Ez. 37:25

Israel will be reconciled with Yahweh through the Messiah, and enter an everlasting covenant with Yahweh. Again Ezekiel writes:

*I will deliver them from all their sins of apostasy, and cleanse them so that they may be my people and I may be their God ... I will make with them a covenant of peace; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will multiply them, and put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling shall be with them ... Thus the nations shall know that it is I, the Lord, who make Israel holy, when my sanctuary shall be set up among them forever.*  
Ez. 37:23,26-28

The history of Israel teaches that salvation is not achieved through political institutions, but only through the intervention of Yahweh. Israel is called to attain perfect union with Yahweh through unqualified submission to His will. Only then will it attain peace and salvation, and the reign of Yahweh thus established in Israel will be extended to all men. Both prophets—Isaiah and Micah—see Zion or Jerusalem as the center from which the word of God will go forth to all the nations, producing universal peace. Hosea sees the salvation of Israel as a return to the desert and a re-establishment of the covenant under Sinai conditions. Israel believed that all this would be achieved through the promised Messiah:

*My servant David shall be prince over them, and there shall be one shepherd for them all; they shall live by my statutes and carefully observe my decrees ... with my servant David their prince forever.*  
Ez. 37:24-25



It is against this backdrop of ancient prophecies—and the Jewish interpretation of these prophecies—that Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth as Christ. In Matthew's gospel account, Jesus is the fulfillment of the messianic promises and expectations.

In the days of Jesus and the Apostles, messianic expectation was in the very air breathed by the Jews. The Apostles, through their association with Jesus, came to believe in Him as the Messiah. In their words, "*We have found the Messiah (Jn. 1:41).*" Those who were doubtful that "*anything good could come out of Nazareth*" were invited to "*come, see for yourself (Jn. 1:46).*" The doubtful later came to confess: "*You are the son of God; you are the king of Israel (Jn. 1:49).*" The Scriptures and popular teachings had taught these men what to expect, and Jesus fulfilled their expectations—for awhile. He appeared as "*a prophet powerful in word and deed in the eyes of ... all the people (Lk. 24:19).*" However, the faith of the Apostles could not carry them through the crucifixion of Jesus. Faith in Jesus as the Christ faltered and failed. "*We were hoping that he was the one who would set Israel free (Lk. 24:21).*" As blood drained from the dying body of Jesus, hope drained from the hearts of the apostles. Only one fact rekindled their faith in Jesus the Messiah—a faith never again to be extinguished: "*The Lord has been raised! It is true! He has appeared to Simon (Lk. 24:34).*"

As Paul told the Corinthians:

*... he was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve. After that he was seen by five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still alive, although some have fallen asleep. Next he was seen by James; then by all the apostles. Last of all he was seen by me, as one born out of the normal course.*  
*I Cor. 15:5-8*

This faith manifested by the apostles and the disciples of Jesus is called the Easter Faith, as it is built upon the evidence of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. St. Thomas expressed well the spiritual condition of the Apostles following the crucifixion:

*The other disciples kept telling him: "We have seen the Lord!" His answer was, "I will never believe it without probing the nailprints in his hands, without putting my fingers in the nailmarks and my hand into his side."*  
*Jn. 20:25*

Later, Thomas expressed the Easter Faith in these words: *“My Lord and my God!”* He believed—and so did all the others—because he saw. Jesus told them, *“You became a believer because you saw me (Jn. 20:29).”* It would be the blessed grace of later Christians to *“have not seen and have believed (Jn. 20:29).”* Concerning the written Gospel, John said:

*But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life in his name.* *Jn. 20:31*

*“This faith”* is a faith in a Jesus, who rose from the dead and now sits as Son of God at the right hand of the Father. *“This faith”* motivated the writing of the gospel. It is *“this faith”* that the sacred writers wish to elicit from their readers. The gospel accounts may present a picture of Jesus prior to the resurrection, but it will always do so from the vantage point of the Easter Sunday vision. No matter what appears on the surface of the text, beneath it lies the acute awareness that Jesus of Nazareth is the Incarnated Son of God, now reigning at the right hand of the Father. The presentation of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth in the four gospel accounts is very much directed by the Easter Faith of the Church. How could it be otherwise?

*“In accordance with the Scriptures”* is a refrain often found in the Bible. To demonstrate how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament was part of the early apologetical approach of the Church in its efforts to evangelize the Jews and *“the God-fearing Gentiles.”* Since Matthew wrote to strengthen the Christian Faith and the commitment of Palestinian Jewish converts, he concentrated on presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies. However, this was not the means by which Matthew came to faith in Jesus the Messiah of Israel.

In the opening sentence of his gospel, Matthew calls the Lord *“Jesus Christ.”* Christ has become part of the formal name of Jesus. This reflects not only the Easter Faith, but a Church with a history that has moved from confessing *Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ*, to simply accepting the fact that the two words *Jesus* and *Christ* belong together. For all practical purposes, the two could never be separated. Now and forever, Jesus Christ!

Matthew states an accepted messianic fact when he opens his gospel account with "*A family record of Jesus Christ.*" With this opening title, he proclaims Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah. When he speaks of Him as being "*son of David, son of Abraham,*" he states the obvious. The Messiah would evidently be the descendant of David as foretold in the Scriptures, but even more importantly as Paul demonstrated, the Messiah would be the descendant of Abraham as a fulfillment of the covenant promise Yahweh made to the great patriarch. By relating the Messiah to Abraham, Matthew quite subtly implies that He is the savior of the Gentiles through whom all the Nations will be blessed, in keeping with the promise made to Abraham.

Matthew gives us a genealogy of Jesus in this way:

*Thus the total number of generations is: from Abraham to David, fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian captivity, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian captivity to the Messiah, fourteen generations.* *Mt. 1-17*

As the genealogy appears in the Gospel today, we have only thirteen generations in both the first and the third sections. As a tax collector, we know Matthew knew his math. It is presumed that the first generation would be the one up to Abraham, and the second generation would be from Abraham to Isaac. This would give us fourteen in the first section. I would attribute the omission in the third section to a translator's error.

Some scholars believe this third division of fourteen has been influenced by the fact that King David's name in gematria equals fourteen. By means of this genealogy, Mathew demonstrates that Joseph, the supposed father of Jesus, was a pure Israelite of Davidic origin; Jesus was born in the House of David. Among the Jewish people such genealogies that supported the purity of an Israelite's bloodline were extremely important, both from a civil and a religious standpoint. From the point of view of one's civil rights and privileges, only a pure Israelite could be a priest of the temple or marry into the priestly families, be a member of the ruling body of Israel—the Sanhedrin, a member of a criminal court, or even a member of a local community court or local community council. Before entering into a marriage contract or receiving a civil appointment, genealogies were examined.

Even more important were the religious aspects. The most important of all was the Jewish belief that the graces of God, present and future, depended upon ancestry; the belief was that one inherited the merits of their ancestors. This spiritual inheritance aided prayer, supplied for personal defects, afforded special protection in times of danger, expiated for sins and thereby appeased God's wrath and delivered them from the fires of Gehenna, and assured them a place in the Kingdom of God. With a good and pure genealogy, one's soul rested quite securely. The prayers of such people were considered especially efficacious, since the merits and intercessory power of their ancestors added to them. Among Rabbis there was a saying, "*The prayers of a righteous man—the son of a righteous man—are not like the prayers of a righteous man—the son of a wicked man (b. Yeb. 64a).*"

Men of Israel were warned not to marry women whose ancestry was not as pure as their own because affliction would fall upon their children (b. Kidd. /Oa). Only the Israelites of pure descent could share in the blessings of the covenant—which implied messianic salvation—since they alone would be assisted by the merits of their legitimately pure Israeli ancestry. According to Jewish belief, an assurance of salvation and a participation in the messianic kingdom depended upon racial purity. Above all, it was most blessed to be a pure child of the Covenant, a direct and uncontaminated descendant of Abraham. As great as this may have been, Matthew does not hesitate to imply that Jesus' essential purity comes from God and not from man.

Abraham, David, and Jesus are the central personalities in the genealogy. The messianic promises began with Abraham, became personalized in David, and were fulfilled with Jesus. The genealogy ends with Jesus, as the promises made to Abraham and David find fulfillment.

Matthew's first section—Abraham to David—harmonizes with the genealogy found in I Chronicles 2:1-15, in which Tamar appears as the mother of Perez. Matthew likewise agrees with the Book of Ruth, which gives a short genealogy from Perez to David, where Ruth, a Moabite woman, appears as the wife of Boaz and the mother of Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse was the father of King David. It was written of Ruth and Obed:

*... the Lord enabled her to conceive and she bore a son ...  
Blessed is the Lord who has not failed to provide you today with  
an heir! May he become famous in Israel. Ruth 4:13-14*

Matthew mentions Rahab as the mother of Boaz. There is little doubt that the Rahab mentioned is the same harlot who aided the Israelite spies; but she lived nearly two hundred years before Boaz.

Matthew's second section is largely in harmony with the genealogy of David given in First Chronicles 3:1-24. However, there is an omission of three kings—Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah—between Joram and Uzziah. Uzziah appears in the Chronicles under the given name of Azariah rather than his real name of Uzziah. We also read that Josiah became the father of Jechoniah. In reality, he was the grandfather of Jechoniah and the father of Jehoiakim. The names are obviously similar and Jechoniah could have been omitted by an error in translation, and because of this a generation would have been lost out of the genealogy.

Matthew's third section has little agreement with I Chronicles beyond its first generation. The second generation mentioned in I Chronicles places Pediah as the father of Zerubbabel, whereas Matthew says that Shealtiel, the brother of Pediah, is the father of Zerubbabel. From this point on there is no agreement between Matthew and the account in I Chronicles: the names are not the same. From the third generation on, down to Joseph, Matthew apparently followed a genealogy of David which was familiar to him.

In his genealogy, Matthew mentions four women other than Mary. This has caused a lot of interest. Not the fact that Matthew listed women, but that he mentioned *those* particular women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "*the wife of Uriah*," who was Bathsheba. St. Jerome pointed out that they had one thing in common: they all broke the sixth commandment. Tamar seduced her father-in-law; Rahab was a harlot; Ruth's sin no one is certain about (except St. Jerome), but as a widow she went about getting her second husband in an unconventional manner; Bathsheba was an adulteress with David.

In the mind of St. Jerome, all these women were sinners and symbolized the role of Jesus to save sinners. However, this was not very insightful on Jerome's part. With men like David in the line-up—an adulterer and a murderer—there would have been no need to call in a few questionable



sinful women for such a symbolic purpose; there was already ample material in the genealogy for that intention.

Luther was kinder in suggesting that since all four women were foreigners they were a symbol of the Messiah's mission to the Gentiles. However there is a better explanation that sees them as having something in common with Mary; all four of these women were brought by unusual means into the divine plan of salvation. What on the surface appeared unorthodox and even perhaps scandalous had been woven by God into the redemptive plan. What could be more unorthodox and open to scandal than a "*virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son*"?

A genealogy of Jesus appears also in Luke's gospel account, which differs from the one found in Matthew. Luke traces the lineage of Joseph through Nathan instead of Solomon. Nathan and Solomon both were born of Bathsheba. Matthew and Luke agree that Joseph was of the House of David. Both make the point that Jesus was not the natural son of Joseph, but became his son by adoption. God is the natural Father of Jesus. If Jesus was a natural descendant of David, it was through his Mother Mary. It has been suggested that Matthew followed a recognized genealogy for the House of David popular at that time, and that Luke followed the genealogy known for the family of Joseph. Later historical records testify that certain known relatives of Jesus were put to death under the Romans for being the descendants of King David. It has also been suggested—but not widely accepted—that one evangelist gives the genealogy of Joseph, and the other the genealogy of Mary.

Jesus certainly received through Mary the purity of his natural heritage. Mary received the privilege of her Immaculate Conception, which means that the Mother of Jesus Christ was in the state of grace from the moment of her conception in the womb of her mother. This privilege was granted to her so that God's Son would flow from a pure spring, rather than from one polluted by original sin and under the dominion of Satan.

The Church finds scriptural confirmation of this truth in Genesis, "*I will put enmity between you (Satan) and the woman (Mother of the Messiah), and between your offspring and hers (Gen. 3:15).*" And in the angel Gabriel's salutation to Mary, "*Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women (Lk. 1:28).*"

The Church has not seen this as so extraordinary in view of the fact that John the Baptist was born without sin, having been cleansed of sin in his mother's womb. Of course none of this implies that Mary or John were removed from the necessity of being redeemed. Mary was redeemed in an exceptional manner that preserved her from sin in the light of her extraordinary role of being Mother of our Savior. She acknowledged, "*My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit finds joy in God my savior (Lk. 1:46).*"

In his opening chapter, Matthew intends to tell us *Who* the Messiah is. In order to do so, he must introduce his readers to two important and special persons in the life of Jesus in the order of their appearance: Joseph and Mary.

Joseph and Mary are not images within a Christian tableau, or figurines to decorate a nativity scene. They are two living people who, after God, were the life supports of the most important Person in human history: Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World. The names they bore in life suggest that Yahweh knew them before He formed them in the womb, and before they were born He had already dedicated them to their unique vocations and roles in salvation history.

For the Semitic people, a name was considered an essential expression of personality—a counterpart of its bearer. The name Joseph means *may he add*. We read in Genesis that when Rachel bore a son, "*she named him Joseph, meaning, 'May the Lord add another son to this one for me' (Gen. 30:24).*" Joseph by trade was a *tekton*—a worker in wood—perhaps a cabinet maker. The Scripture proclaims him to be a *just* man. It is Luke who perhaps best explains the meaning of *just*, when he speaks of Zechariah and Elizabeth—parents of John the Baptist—as being "*both just in the eyes of God, blamelessly following all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord (Lk. 1:6).*"

In the Old Testament, the first person to appear with the name Mary or Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron. Both brothers bear Egyptian names, and most agree that Miriam or Mary is a name of Egyptian origin, coming from the root *mry*, meaning *beloved*. With the addition of *yaw* or *yaya* to the root, it becomes *Beloved of Yahweh*. Luke might have played on the words when he recorded that Gabriel said: "*Do not fear, Mary. You have found favor with God. (Lk. 1:30).*"

Matthew has identified Jesus as the “*son of David.*” Then he proceeded to demonstrate how Jesus was the Son of David by giving a genealogy that ended with Joseph. When one would have expected to read “*and Joseph was the father of Jesus,*” the unexpected occurred. Matthew wrote, “*Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary. It was of her that Jesus who is called the Messiah was born (Mt. 1:16).*” The implication is clear: Mary is the Mother of the Messiah, but Joseph is not the father of the Messiah even though he is the husband of Mary. Matthew does not for a moment leave his readers hesitant about the true paternity of the Messiah:

*Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

*Mt.1:18*

The Virgin Mary conceived a child through the operation of the creative power of God by which means the Son of God became *Incarnated*. The angel Gabriel had said to Mary “*for nothing is impossible with God (Lk. 1:36).*” Here Matthew emphasizes that the only earthly parent of Jesus is the Virgin Mary.

We are told that at the time of conception Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married. Marriage within the Jewish culture consisted of two steps. The first step consisted of the couple’s exchange of consent before two witnesses on a Wednesday—preferably at the time of a full moon, which was considered to be good fortune. At this time, the man paid the *mohar* to the family of the girl. Fifty shekels of silver was considered an acceptable payment. Custom likewise required the man to offer his future bride a collection of gifts called the *mattan*, which completed the engagement. Engagement usually occurred when a girl reached puberty, around the age of twelve or thirteen. It was customary for her to remain in her father’s house for one year afterward.

During this period of the year, the Law recognized rights and privileges similar to that of the marriage state. If the fiancé died during this interval, the girl was considered a widow; if a child was born during this time, it was considered legitimate. Autumn was thought to be the best time for a wedding; the harvest was in and the vintage also. The days were more relaxed and the weather more agreeable. It was a good time to celebrate.

The marriage itself occurred when the bridegroom came to the home of the bride to take her to himself. He came in procession with his attendants under the direction of *"the friends of the bridegroom."* The bride, with her hair down, her face veiled, and golden adornments upon her head, was carried on a litter to the home of the bridegroom. All along the way, wedding songs were sung. Upon arrival at the house, the parents met the procession and recited prescribed blessings over the couple.

A celebration then began, to which all relatives, neighbors, friends, and friends of friends were invited. During the first evening of celebration, the bride remained in seclusion with her bridesmaids. The following day, they joined in the festivities. The second evening the couple departed to be alone and the marriage was consummated. The next day, the couple rejoined the celebration which lasted seven full days, and at times, fourteen days.

Jesus was not the natural son of Joseph, but He was publicly acknowledged as being the son of Joseph. *"Is not this Joseph's son' the people asked (Lk. 4:22)."* This implied that Joseph had acknowledged publicly that Jesus was his son. The Law based paternity upon the man's acknowledgment of the child. It was presumed that a man would not accept and support a child unless it was his own. So we read, *"If a man says, 'This is my son,' he is to be believed (Mishna Baba Bathra 8:6)."* If a man named the child, he legally acknowledged the child to be his own. For the Semitic people, legal paternity was real paternity.

Matthew explains how this came to be, and thereby reinforces the true natural paternity of Jesus:

*Joseph her husband, an upright man unwilling to expose her to the law, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said to him: "Joseph, son of David, have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son and you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."* Mt. 1:19-21

We see three things here: Jesus is not the natural son of Joseph, Joseph is a just or upright man (he follows the laws and observances of his religion), and he acknowledges Jesus to be his son. *"The man who loves God knows His*

*Law both in letter and spirit.*” Mary’s pregnancy was obvious to Joseph, and even more certain was the fact that he was not the father. The Law read:

*If a man, after marrying a woman ... and evidence of the girl’s virginity is not found, they shall bring the girl to the entrance of her father’s house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death ... Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst. Dt. 22:13,20-21*

Joseph was not a legalist—one who followed the letter of the Law, however he obeyed God’s will by discerning the mind and intent of the lawgiver—he discerned the spirit behind the Law. Once Joseph weighed the evidence with a clear conscience, he had determined to put Mary away privately. This was the only way he could continue to love Mary and yet put God before her. This was a human solution, limited as all such are.

In spite of this, it left the door wide open for a perfect divine solution, because Joseph was completely open to the divine will as he understood it. Without any extraordinary manifestation of God’s will, he was obliged to be directed by Deuteronomy. The statement, *“purge the evil from your midst,”* opened the door to divorce as the solution. By this means, he could comply with the Law in spirit and cause Mary the least harm. Divorce consisted of a written notice of dismissal before two witnesses, and this could be done without any public accusation of Mary.

Joseph decided upon this solution until God intervened in his dream and manifested to him His perfect will. As always, the Will of God directed his life as it had Mary’s, and would direct the life of Jesus. Matthew implies that Joseph would not have accepted Jesus as his son if God had not enlightened him concerning the true paternity of the child. The love of the Will of God was the one thing all three—Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—would have in common; it was the foundation of the Holy Family they constituted.

Matthew concludes his opening scene with these words:

*All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel,” a name which means “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke he did as the angel of the Lord had*

*directed him and received her into his home as his wife. He had no relations with her at any time before she bore a son, whom he named Jesus.*

*Mt. 1:22-25*

These verses are filled with interest and meaning, which must be left for another lesson.

The Church has given this advice to Christians (and some of the greatest saints have echoed it): When one has problems and heaven seems unresponsive—the Gate appears to be closed—*then “GO TO JOSEPH!”* In his debt are two important people: Jesus The Lord, and Mary His Mother.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE STORY OF WISE MEN

#### INTRODUCTION

Matthew begins this account by telling us Who the Messiah is. Jesus Christ is from earth, for He is the Son of the Virgin Mary. Christ is from heaven, for by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived Him. The Virgin Birth of Jesus is corroborated both by Matthew and Luke. Our author sees this truth reflected in the words Isaiah spoke to King Ahaz. Matthew writes:

*All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel.'* *Mt. 1:22-23*

In the mind of Matthew this scripture not only defends the Virgin Birth, but it defines the nature of the Virgin's son. The Messiah is Emmanuel—*God with us*. God becomes incarnated in Jesus.

Matthew explains now why the Messiah is called *Jesus*, instead of *Emmanuel*. The Messiah is *Emmanuel*, but he bears the name that expresses his relation to the human race. The prophecy, as quoted by Matthew, is expressed somewhat differently in Isaiah: "*and shall name him Immanuel (Is. 7:14),*" and in Matthew: "*they shall call him Emmanuel (Mt. 1:23)*". Apparently Matthew alters the quote in order for it to flow smoothly with the angel's message to Joseph: "*... you are to name him Jesus (Mt. 1:21)*." In other words, the Messiah is Emmanuel but he will be "*named*" Jesus.

The use of this prophecy from Isaiah by Matthew has been questioned from ancient times. Those who disagreed with the Christian religion in the first centuries pointed out that the word translated by the Hebrew scholars in Alexandria as virgin is *alma*. In the Hebrew language, *alma* means a young maiden of marriageable age. The word commonly used in Hebrew to express virgin is *betulah*. When the Hebrew scholars translated *alma* into



Greek as *parthenos* (virgin), it was a mistranslation. These critics maintained that the correct translation of *alma* would have been *neanis*, which means *young girl*.

It may be presumed that the Hebrew scholars knew the meaning of *neanis*. The fact that they did not use it suggests that it did not express to the Greek readers the intention of the author or the force of the prophecy. In their minds, the word *parthenos*, meaning virgin, did so. Even the critics agree that an *alma*, in the Hebrew culture, was presumed to be a virgin. We see from chapter twenty-two of Deuteronomy that her life may have depended upon it. Within the Greek culture *neanis* may not have conveyed this same concept, and therefore *parthenos* was a better translation.

The angel said to Joseph, "... you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins (Mt. 1:21)." The name *Jesus* comes from the Hebrew *Yehosua*, which was later shortened to *Yesua*, or *Yesu*. *Yehosua*--translated Joshua--was the name given by Moses to his successor. We see in Numbers 13:16 that Moses changed this man's name from *Hoshea*, meaning *salvation*, to *Joshua*. In the original language *Yehosua*, with its root in *sw* (to help), meant *Yahweh helps*. However, the shorter form *Yesua* was connected with the root *ys* (to save). Therefore the name *Jesus* carries the meaning of *Yahweh saves*.

Matthew seeks to tie together the concepts *Emmanuel* and *Jesus*, because together they express both the nature and the vocation of the Messiah. From the beginning, Matthew makes it clear that the Messiah will not be in keeping with Jewish expectations. This *mosia*, or *Savior*, does not come to bring political freedom from Rome but spiritual freedom from sin, "*He will save his people from their sins.*" In other words, his people will be freed of their sins and thereby freed to seek *eternal life in his name*. Matthew sets the theme: God is with us in the Messiah--Jesus of Nazareth--who saves us from sin.

From its conception, the Christian Community highly extolled the Name of Jesus. From the moment of its commission by the Risen Jesus Christ, the Church would do all, be all, become all in the Name of Jesus Christ. *In the name of* meant in the *person of*, and with the *power of*. Peter said to the cripple who begged by the gate called *the Beautiful*: "*In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, walk (Acts 3:6)!*"

Later, Peter said to the people in Solomon's Portico:

*It is his name and trust in this name, that has strengthened the limbs of this man who you see and know well. Such faith has given him perfect health.* Acts 3:16

Peter urged the Jews:

*You must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven.* Acts 2:38a

Over the possessed girl of Philippi, Paul said:

*"In the name of Jesus Christ I command you, come out of her!" Then and there the spirit left her.* Acts 16:18

Paul pleaded for Christian Unity in the name of Jesus:

*I beg you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree in what you say. Let there be no factions; rather, be united in mind and judgment.* I Cor. 1:10

The Church prayed to God in the Name of Jesus:

*... O Lord, look at the threats they are leveling against us. Grant to your servant, even as they speak your words, complete assurance by stretching forth your hand in cures and signs and wonders to be worked in the name of Jesus, your holy Servant.* Acts 4:29-30

Christians are exhorted in this manner:

*Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Give thanks to God the Father through him.* I Col. 3:17

In Philippians, the crown of glory is placed upon the Name of Jesus:

*God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue*

*proclaim to the glory of God the Father: JESUS CHRIST IS  
LORD!*

*Phil. 2:10-11*

*“In the Name of Jesus Christ” truly signifies that Jesus is alive and operative in His People on earth. Peter taught, and the Church confirms:*

*There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved.*

*Acts 4:12*

Matthew concludes the first chapter of his gospel account with these words:

*When Joseph awoke he did as the angel of the Lord had directed him and received her into his home as his wife. He had no relations with her at the time before she bore a son, whom he named Jesus. When Joseph gave the child the name “Jesus,” he legally acknowledged him to be his son. In this text, Matthew confirms that the Messiah is the “son of David” by legal adoption.*

*Mt. 1:24-25*

Matthew does not make any statement here--either pro or con--concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary. In this first chapter, it is his intention to confirm the supernatural and virginal conception of Jesus Christ. He teaches that the Virgin Mary conceived a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. He makes clear that prior to the birth of Jesus there was no sexual relationship between Joseph and Mary. This is what Matthew intended and did teach. Those who read into this text that Mary subsequently bore other children by Joseph read more into the text than intended by the author and allowed by Church Tradition.

Some heretics of the early times within the Church--such as the Helvedians--used the above text to support their teaching that Mary subsequently did have other children by Joseph. Certain other translations of this text translate correctly *heos hou* as *not until*. We may read, “...and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son...” Scholars have pointed out that the use of *not until* is misleading in the English text.

In English, when something is negated until a certain time, the presumption is that it will occur at a later date. However, this is not true in Greek or in Aramaic. The use of *heos hou* (not until) in the Greek language often does

not intend to convey the idea that a thing occurred after the limit of the *until* was reached. When Luke speaks of the prophetess Anna living as a widow "*until she was eighty-four,*" he does not intend to imply that she married at eighty-five.

Also, the use of *firstborn*, does not imply a second born. *Firstborn* was a legal term for the heir and the term itself does not imply subsequent children. Inscriptions, on tombs dating from those times speak of women who died giving birth to their *firstborn*. Again, those texts in Scriptures that speak of the *brethren* of Jesus can be demonstrated to mean other relatives than blood brothers and sisters. We dealt more deeply with this subject in other studies. For the present, we will be content with saying that the perpetual virginity of Mary can neither be proved nor disproved from what we read in the Scriptures. It is a truth rooted in the traditional teaching of the Church. The perpetual virginity of Mary found general acceptance within the Christian Community until 1800. One Anglican scholar observed that it is difficult to explain how the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary was so widely accepted in the early Church if her natural children had been members and leaders of the early Church.

### WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

Matthew identifies the place of Jesus' birth as Bethlehem of Judea. Bethlehem was a village located at about five miles south of Jerusalem. It has been identified with the Ephrath mentioned in Genesis--the burial place of Rachel and the birth place of King David. The name *Bethlehem* may mean *House of Bread*. In the mind of the prophet Micah, it was an insignificant village. At the time of Jesus' birth, it probably had no more than three hundred inhabitants. However, in the mind of Matthew it was anything but an insignificant place, Jesus having been born there. When Matthew quotes the prophet, he omits any reference to Bethlehem's insignificance. Jesus' date of birth is placed within the reign of Herod the Great. The Roman Senate proclaimed Herod as King of the Jews in 40 B.C. He is known to have died in 4 B.C. It is believed that Jesus was born about two years before the death of Herod. This places his birth at 6 B.C., six years before the commonly accepted beginning of the Christian A.D.

This resulted from a miscalculation in the sixth century; until that time, in the western world years were recorded from the foundation of Rome (A.U.C.). In 533, Dionysius Exiguus proposed to record the years starting from the

birth of Christ, instead of the foundation of Rome. By miscalculation, he established the birth of Christ to have been 754 A.U.C., which he established to be 1 A.D. However, Herod died in the year 750, which under the new calculation, recorded his death at 4 B.C. Both Matthew and Luke place the birth of Jesus during the reign of King Herod of Judea. Therefore, the birth of Jesus probably occurred in the year 748 A.U.C., which according to our present reckoning, would be 6 B.C.

Matthew tells us that after the birth of Jesus, Magi came from the East to pay him homage. We read:

*After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judea during the reign of King Herod, astrologers from the east arrived one day in Jerusalem inquiring, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."*

*Mt. 2:1-2*

In our translation, the *magos* or *magi* are called *astrologers*. Originally they were Medians who later came to be a priestly caste among the Persians. The magi were esteemed as wise men possessing secret power and knowledge. They specialized in the interpretation of dreams. They were students of astrology and believed that the stars foretold and directed the destinies of people.

The science of astrology had a firm hold upon the minds and spirits of these ancient people. It was a common belief that a star appeared at every person's birth and waned at the time of death. It was widely believed that extraordinary manifestations of lights occurred in the heavens when great people were born or earth shaking events would occur. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, mentioned unusual appearances of lights above and around the city of Jerusalem prior to its destruction. He chastised the Jews for not recognizing the warning signs of destruction:

*...they did not attend nor give credit to the signs that were so evident, and did so plainly foretell their future desolation, but, like men infatuated, without either eyes to see or minds to consider, did not regard the denunciations that God made to them. Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year.*

*Wars VI, v, 3*

Comets were popularly supposed to herald the death of a person of great importance. When one appeared for several nights in succession over Rome, the alarmed Nero fulfilled the portent by putting to death certain important citizens of Rome. The Roman historian Suetonius reported that a portent appeared in the sky--heralding the birth of Augustus--that so alarmed the Roman Senate that they issued a decree forbidding the rearing of any male child for a year (Augustus 94). The ancient world would have expected a heavenly light of great magnitude to have heralded the birth of the Messiah. The belief that a great leader would rise out of Judea had spread beyond the Jews. If the magi had interpreted to Herod that certain unusual lights in the heavens announced the birth of the King of the Jews, Herod would have indeed been alarmed.

Remarkable astronomical phenomena occurred around the time Jesus was born. The comet, named after E. Halley, appears every seventy-seven years. It appeared between 12-11 B.C. The biblical scholar Lagrange sighted the comet in 1911, while living in Jerusalem. According to his report, it came from the East, faded away overhead and reappeared several days later as it set in the West. A most unusual formation of the three planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, occurs every 805 years (Kepler) in which they are very close together. This rare triple conjunction occurred between 7 and 6 B.C. and in the zodiacal constellation of Pisces. In ancient times, Pisces was a constellation associated both with the Hebrews and with the last days. Jupiter was associated with a world ruler and Saturn was identified as the star of the Palestine region. Observing these astral phenomena, astrologers from the East could have interpreted this to mean that a world ruler had appeared among the Jews. Some have identified the star cited by the Magi as a "nova", which is a distant star that explodes and gives forth a great deal of light for some time. In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius gave this description of the star of Bethlehem:

*A star shone in heaven brighter than all the stars. Its light was indescribable and its novelty caused amazement. The rest of the stars, along with the sun and the moon, formed a ring around it; yet it outshone them all, and there was bewilderment whence this unique novelty had arisen.*

Ignatius' description is certainly poetical and he interpreted the star's appearance as a symbol that:

*...all magic lost its power and all witchcraft ceased. Ignorance was done away with, and the ancient kingdom of evil was utterly destroyed.*

The star heralded the birth of the Light of the World. It was no doubt Matthew's intention to recall to his readers that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Balaam, "*A star shall advance from Jacob and a staff shall rise from Israel (Num. 24:17).*" Balaam came from the East and Philo called him a *magos*. Indeed, the Magi coming from the East to behold the Light of the World recalled the words of Isaiah:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;  
Upon those who dwelt in the land of the gloom a light has  
shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing  
... For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder  
dominion rests. ....From David's throne, and over his  
kingdom....*

*Is. 9:1,2,5,6*

Roman historians recorded a visit of Tiridates, king of Armenia, to the court of Nero in 66 A.D. Tiridates, accompanied by the sons of three Parthian rulers, came from east of the Euphrates in a triumphal procession to Rome. Tiridates said to Nero, "*I have come to you, my god, to pay homage, as I do to Mithras.*" Pliny referred to Tiridates and his companions as magi. It is reported that the king and his companions did not return the same way they had come but sailed home another way.

Justin the Martyr, writing around 150 A.D., said that the Magi came from Arabia. However, most of the early Fathers of the Church believed they came from Persia. Some thought they had been motivated by the predictions of Zoroaster, which foretold the birth of the Messiah. Early Christian art pictured the magi in Persian dress. When the Persian armies swept through Palestine in 614, destroying all Christian shrines and churches, they spared the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem because above the entrance to the church was a mosaic of the Magi dressed as Persians. Later tradition--influenced by Psalm 72-- pictured the Magi as kings. Psalm 72 speaks of the reign of the Messiah and it proclaims:



*The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay him homage, all nations shall serve him.* Ps. 72:10-11

Matthew makes no mention of the number of Magi, but tradition gives their number as three, as only three gifts were offered. In Persia no one appeared before a king without the offering of a gift. The earliest names for the Magi appeared in the East: Hormizdah, king of Persia; Yazdegerd, king of Saba; and Perozadh, king of Sheba. In Ethiopia they were called *Hor*, *Basanater*, and *Karsudan*. In the Western world they became known as Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar.

### THE GUIDING STAR

Yahweh promised Abraham: "*All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you (Gen. 12:3).*" The coming of the Magi to the Messiah was a symbolic fulfillment of this promise. It demonstrates that the Messiah is the Light of the Nations, and it implies He is the Savior of the World. Matthew wishes to emphasize that all the communities of the earth are blessed in the son of Abraham--Jesus Christ. The star led the Magi. They came seeking truth through a natural sign. Nature led them to Jerusalem.

Paul wrote to the Romans:

*Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognized through the things he has made.* Rm. 1:20

Paul speaks of a natural revelation that becomes a light within the hearts of men. This natural light--and men's response to it--will be the measure by which many human beings will be judged. As Paul taught:

*... their thoughts will accuse or defend them on the day when, in accordance with the gospel I preach, God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.* Rm.2:15-16

Many people sincerely seek God through the channels opened to them. Some people have only their conscience to guide them to God. For one reason or another, supernatural revelation is not available to them. They will be judged justly by God. Paul told the Romans:

*... the just judgment of God will be revealed when he will repay every man for what he has done; eternal life to those who strive for glory, honor and immortality by patiently doing right... Rm. 2:5*

However, only being saved does not fulfill God's will for mankind. Paul wrote Timothy that God "*wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth (I Tim. 2:4).*" We can be saved and not come to the truth in this world. We can come to the truth and not be saved in the end. God's love wills that all men be freed from sin, and possess that supernatural light needed to grow and develop as God's children.

Matthew makes it clear that one cannot come to supernatural revelation through nature. Natural revelation leads only so far. Because of the obstacles in this world, so few come to the natural truths of religion unaided by grace. Supernatural revelation is needed and must be sought where deposited. God has revealed a plan for universal salvation. This fullness of revelation must be sought from those who are the custodians and recipients of divine revelation. Jesus acknowledged, "*Salvation comes from the Jews.*" The revelation received by God's People was preserved in the Sacred Scriptures. We have already outlined how the plan of salvation unfolded through the prophets, until it reached fulfillment in the Messiah.

Natural light and logic lead the Magi to Jerusalem, but it could not lead them to the Messiah. Now they must turn to the inspired sources. They ask the Jews--the recipients and custodians of divine revelation: "*Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage (Mt. 2:2).*" They know he exists and who he is--to a limited degree--but without supernatural light they would never find Him in this world, and come to that joy which possessing him alone can give. We read:

*At this news King Herod became greatly disturbed, and with him all Jerusalem. Summoning all of the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea," they informed him. "Here is what the prophet has written: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the princes of Judah, since from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

*Mt. 2:3-6*

## REACTION IN JERUSALEM

The prophet Micah foretold that a ruler of Israel would come out of Bethlehem from the clan of Judah. However, as the prophecy is quoted in Matthew, the words of the prophet—“*whose origin is from old, from ancient times (Mi. 5:1)*”—are omitted, and in their place are added the words spoken to David in 2 Samuel when Israel requested King David to rule over them, “*You shall shepherd my people Israel (2 Sam. 5:2).*” This addition seems to be more a message from Matthew to his wise readers, than one to the Magi from the learned scribes. As Matthew presents the prophecy, it stresses the shepherd-like quality of the Messiah's rule:

*I am the good shepherd who knows his sheep and who they recognize; who keeps them safe from the wolves! who seeks the lost one and lays down his life for his sheep.*  
See John:10

Jesus is the antithesis of the present and reigning King of the Jews--Herod the Great.

Apparently, the chief priest and scribes and “*all Jerusalem*” were more disturbed by the fact of Herod being alarmed about the message of the Magi than they were over the message itself. An alarmed and threatened Herod could cause serious social and political repercussions. No doubt they would have sought to ease Herod's fears--for the good of the nation.

The scribes had an academic interest in the Scriptural references to the Messiah. They could quote them; however, they were open to other opinions. There was a popular thought that certainly had merit, “*When the Messiah comes, no one will know where he comes from--his origin will be clothed in mystery.*” Because a man knows the Bible, it doesn't follow that he has found God. These scribes were professional religious--not necessarily men of faith. They centered their time and interest upon supporting, maintaining, and nourishing the religious system which sustained their lives. They had neither faith nor interest in the sign or quest of the Magi. They treated all such messianic scares as “sensible” Christians today treat all those precise predictions of the Second Coming. Jesus once said to them:

*Search the Scriptures in which you think you have eternal life- they also testify on my behalf. Yet you are unwilling to come to me to possess that life.* Jn. 5:39-40

Some years later, reflecting upon the tragedy of the Jews, Josephus wrote:

*Now if anyone consider these things, he will find that God takes care of mankind, and by all ways possible foreshows to our race what is for their preservation; but that men perish by those miseries which they madly and voluntarily bring upon themselves ... These men interpreted some of these signals according to their own pleasure, and some of them they utterly despised, until their madness was demonstrated, both by the taking of their city and their own destruction.* Wars. VI, v,4

However, it should be noted that the Scribes, by their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, were able to direct correctly the Magi to Christ, even though they themselves would not seek Him. Teresa of Avila used to say:

*Do not seek advice from the ignorant man even if he is holy. Rather go to the learned man, even if he is not holy. Chances are he will know the way even when he fails to follow it: he can point you in the right direction.*

The Scribes correctly directed the Magi to go where they would not go. Paul was to teach us that “*knowing all mysteries and having faith great enough to remove mountains was not enough.*”

Matthew relates:

*Herod called the astrologers aside and found out from them the exact time of the star's appearance. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, after having instructed them: “Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have found him, report it to me so that I may go and offer him homage too.”* Mt. 2:7-8

Our author narrates that the Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking: “*Where is the newborn king of the Jews?*” We will not hear of it again in this account until we come to Calvary.

Herod--the reigning king of the Jews by the grace of Rome--was not an Israelite of pure ancestry. His father was Antipater, an Idumean (people who lived between Judeah and Egypt). The Idumeans had been forced, under John Hyrcanus, to convert to Judaism. The Jews did not consider them true Jews. Herod's mother was Cypris, an Arabian princess. The most Herod could claim was being half Jew. His stepping stone to power was his father, Antipater. The Romans made Antipater the procurator of Judea, and John Hyrcanus II the ethnarch, with religious authority only. Herod began his political career at twenty-five, with a government appointment to Galilee; he was appointed by his father. He was a man of personal magnitude and physical power; he was extremely astute and a master of political maneuver. He not only survived the shifting sands of Roman politics, but he used them to rise to great personal power, which he maintained for over forty years.

In the civil war that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., Herod allied first with Cassius, then with Mark Anthony, and finally with the overall winner, Augustus. He was declared "*king of the Jews*" by the Roman Senate. In order to obtain his throne, he had to depose Antigonus--the brother of Hyrcanus II--who, with the aid of the Parthians, had succeeded in becoming king. Herod defeated Antigonus and came to the throne in 37 B.C. His reign extended to cover Judea, Indumea, Samaria, Galilee, Perea, and Bashen. He was a man with boundless energy. He rebuilt cities and the temple at Jerusalem, which he adorned magnificently.

Personally, he was indifferent to the Jewish religion, giving only external observance of it when in Jewish territory. In order to raise his social position with the Jews, he divorced his Idumean wife Doris, and married the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, Mariamme.

Herod was a man of personal ambition and ungovernable passions. As he moved from the green wood into the dry, he moved even more into tyranny and brutality. Herod's sister Salome kept the palace pot boiling with tales of intrigue and sedition, filling Herod's ears with suspense and his heart with fears. The executions began: first, the brother of Mariamme, the high priest Aristobulus; then her grandfather, Hyrcanus II; then Mariamme herself; to be followed by her mother Alexandra and her two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. It was at this point that the Emperor Augustus commented, "*It is better to be Herod's pig than his son*". Herod

killed his own brother Joseph, and Salome sacrificed her first husband, Joseph, and her second, Costoba. Finally Herod killed his oldest son and heir, Antipater, the son of Doris. Three children survived him: Archelaus, Antipas and Philip--all three fell heir to part of his kingdom.

Later, when we read that Herod ordered the slaying of the children in Bethlehem, we see how such an act was in accord with the violence of his reign--particularly in those later years when his security and his throne were concerned. We know that upon his death he had ordered the slaying of members of prominent Jewish families, whom he had previously arrested for the sole mad purpose that tears would flow in the land at the time of his death.

Getting back to the Magi, Matthew goes on to narrate:

*After their audience with the king, they set out. The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house, found the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Mt. 2:9-11*

Often, in our Christian fantasies we envision the star leading the Magi from their homeland on to Jerusalem where it disappears, to reappear on the road to Bethlehem. However, this is not what the narrative relates. We are told that these astrologers sighted the star at its rising, when it appeared in the heavens. They studied the star and the signs, and determined it heralded the birth of the ruler to come out of Judah. With faith in their findings, they set out for the capital of the Jews: Jerusalem. They were perhaps perplexed by the lack of interest in their star or even the knowledge of it. But, after all, these people of Jerusalem were not astrologers.

## BETHLEHEM

The Magi leave Jerusalem, the city which will one day witness the murder of the very One they presently seek to honor as the king of the Jews. Even as they leave the city, its murderous intentions cling to their garments in the hypocritical words Herod whispered in secret to them. We are told

that the star reappears and causes them exceedingly great joy. It has now become a supernatural sign to guide their steps, once their minds have been enlightened by the Holy Scriptures. We may see here certainly a symbol of the Holy Spirit—and even the Church--leading sincere and enlightened hearts to true union with their Lord and Savior.

The reappearance of the star in such a dramatic fashion, following the episode in Jerusalem, was a great confirmation that the journey had not been made in vain. From this point, the light of the star recalls the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the darkened desert on their way to the Promised Land.

We are told that the Magi were led to the house where the child dwelt. Again, we are accustomed to think that the child was found in a cave. Nevertheless, Luke speaks of the child being in a manger, not a cave. The cave has been presumed, because of the presence of the manger. Justin the Martyr (c. 150 A.D.), who was born in the Bethlehem area, testified to a cave as the place of birth of Jesus, and constant tradition maintains this. We are told that the Romans, in the second century under Hadrian, constructed a pagan shrine over the spot which Christians traditionally venerated as the cave where Christ was born. Some have pointed out that the word *oikos*--translated *house*--could also be translated as *village*. We also know that many houses in this area were extensions of caves.

It has been said that Joseph is not mentioned in the adoration of the Magi. Some see this as another confirmation of the virginity of Mary. However, it is more probably a reference to kingship. In the Davidic dynasty, the mother of a newborn or newly installed king was honored as "*the Great Lady*." When Bathsheba appeared before the newly crowned Solomon, we read:

*... the king stood up to meet her and paid her homage. Then he sat down upon his throne, and a throne was provided for the king's mother, who sat at his right.*

*I Kgs. 2:19*

We read in Jeremiah, "*Say to the king and to the queen mother: come down from your throne; from your heads fall your magnificent crowns (Jer. 13:18).*" Matthew invokes a picture of the Magi offering gifts before the thrones of Jesus and Mary--the King and His Queen Mother.



As mentioned earlier, in the East one did not appear before a King without gifts. The gifts offered were gold, frankincense and myrrh. We are told that they paid him homage. In the Greek language, *proskynein*--translated homage, and is used by Matthew thirteen times--can describe the homage offered to a person of dignity or authority, and the adoration and worship paid to a deity. Generally speaking, when used in the New Testament, *proskynein* refers to divine adoration. Here, it has been interpreted to mean both: homage to a King and adoration to God's Son. The gift of gold--the gift of kings--symbolizes the royalty of the child; the gift of frankincense--the gift of divine worship and priesthood--symbolizes the divinity of the child and his priestly character; the gift of myrrh--the gift of death and pain--symbolizes the humanity and sacrifice of the child. As the Magi knelt before the Child and his Mother, Mary and Joseph may have indeed heard in their hearts ancient songs of prophecy:

*Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midain and Ephab; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord.* Is. 60:6

and

*The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All the kings shall pay him homage; all nations shall serve him.* Ps. 72:10-11

Following the adoration of the Magi, Matthew narrates:

*They received a message in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route. After they had left, the angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph with the command: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you otherwise. Herod is searching for the child to destroy him." Joseph got up and took the child and his mother and left that night for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod, to fulfill what the Lord had said through the Prophet: "Out of Egypt I have called my son."* Mt. 2:12-15

## FLIGHT TO EGYPT

When one is dealing with a serpent, one must be as wise as a serpent in order not to be stung. The Magi deceive the deceiver and quickly, quietly, and secretly remove themselves beyond his jurisdiction. They return home before Herod knows they are gone. Often, in the face of might and injustice, the only recourse open to the weak and poor is flight. The Holy Family fled to Egypt and joined that great mass of misplaced persons and refugees from tyranny.

Over a million Jews lived in Egypt--concentrated especially in Alexandria and Heliopolis. Jeroboam "*arose and fled to Egypt*" to escape King Solomon; the prophet Uriah fled to Egypt to escape King Jehoiakim; the high priest Onias IV fled to Egypt to escape King Antiochus Epiphanes; and now Jesus flees with his family to escape Herod, the king of the Jews. Since 30 B.C. Egypt had been under the rule of Rome as an Imperial Prefecture. Tradition believes that the Holy Family joined the Jewish colony in Cairo. Near the ancient Qaraite Jewish synagogue in Cairo stands the church Abu Serghis which is contended to have been built over the spot where the Holy Family lived. Interestingly, a few years ago a series of apparitions of the Holy Family were seen over this Church. They continued for some months and were witnessed by many in Cairo.

Many scholars see in these episodes a symbolic reenactment of the life of Moses and Israel's exodus from Egypt. Josephus gives an interesting account of Moses' birth that was popular among the Jews. He writes:

*One of those sacred scribes, who are very sagacious in foretelling future events truly, told the king, that about this time there would be a child born to the Israelites, whom if he were reared, would bring the Egyptians' dominion low, and would raise the Israelites; that he would excel all men in virtue, and obtain a glory that would be remembered through all ages. Which thing was so feared by the king, that, according to this man's opinion, he commanded that they should cast every male child, which was born to the Israelites, into the river, and destroy it ... He enjoined also, that if any parents should disobey him, and venture to save their male children alive, they and their family should be destroyed ...*

Josephus goes on to relate that the Lord came in a dream to the father of Moses and told him:

*...for that child, out of dread of whose nativity the Egyptians have doomed the Israelite children to destruction, shall be this child of thine, and shall be concealed from those who watch to destroy him: and when he is brought up in a surprising way, he shall deliver the Hebrew nation from the distress they are under from the Egyptians. His memory shall be famous while the world lasts; and this not only among the Hebrews, but foreigners also--all which shall be the effect of my favour to thee, and to thy posterity.*  
Anti. IX,2

Matthew quotes the prophet Hosea, "When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son (Hos. 11:1)." He does not imply that the flight into Egypt was willed by God no more than he implies that the slaughter of the children was willed by God. He recalls the words of Hosea as a reminder that the love of God protected the child in exile. We are told:

*Once Herod realized that he had been deceived by the astrologers, he became furious. He ordered the massacre of all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and its environs, making his calculations on the basis of the date he had learned from the astrologers. What was said through Jeremiah the prophet was then fulfilled: "A cry was heard at Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation. Rachel, bewailing her children; no comfort for her since they are no more."*  
Mt. 2:16-18

Here, Matthew quotes the Prophet Jeremiah, whose words apply to those going into exile. The tomb of Rachel was near Bethlehem and it was here that the Israelites were gathered for the exile into Babylon. The question often rises about the number of children slain in this episode. When all the facts have been considered, it is believed that the number would have been less than twenty children.

In the concluding part of this narration on the childhood of Jesus, Matthew tells his readers how it is that the "son of David" came to live in Nazareth--from where no good can come--and in Galilee, from whence no acceptable prophet comes:

*But after Herod's death, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt with the command: "Get up, take the child and his mother, and set out for the land of Israel. Those who had designs on the life of the child are dead." He got up, took the child and his mother, and returned to the land of Israel. He heard, however, that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as king of Judea, and he was afraid to go back there. Instead, because of a warning received in a dream, Joseph went to the region of Galilee. There he settled in a town called Nazareth. In this way what was said through the prophets was fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazorean."* Mt. 2:19-23

This reference to a prophecy calling the Messiah a *Nazorean* has caused scholars considerable trouble, for there is no clear Scripture reference to this. However, the word *nazir* in its root *ndr* means *to vow*. It carries the idea of a person being vowed to the service of God. A *nazir* would be one consecrated to God by a vow. It likewise carries the concept of holiness and often is translated into Greek as *hagios* meaning holy. Calling Jesus a *Nazorean*, may intend to compare him to such holy men as Samuel and Sampson who were both dedicated to God before birth. In Judges 13:2-7, the angel of the Lord told the wife of Manoah that she would have a son who would be from birth a *Nazirite* to God, and that he would deliver Israel from its enemies. Samson later said: "*I have been consecrated to God from my mother's womb (Jgs. 16:17).*" In Isaiah, we read its equivalent: "*He ... will be called holy (Is. 4:3).*" By calling Jesus a *Nazorean*, Matthew reminds his readers that Jesus has been set aside from conception for the service of God--to save his people.

Matthew has presented the infancy of Jesus before introducing us to his public life. By so doing, he has been able to reveal the true nature of the Messiah. In the episode of the Magi's coming to Jerusalem and Herod's reaction to the news of the Messiah's birth, he has been able to explain how Jesus can be the Messiah and still come from Nazareth in Galilee. In the material for this drama, he sees a forecast of the Messiah's future destiny. He will be accepted by the Gentiles, and despised and rejected by the Jews who will conspire with the political powers for his destruction. It tells a story of belief and acceptance followed by adoration. It also tells a story of disbelief and rejection, followed by persecution. In the Infancy Narratives, the stage is set for what must come.

Certain scholars see this whole narration as no more than *midrash*--a method of teaching in which a Jewish rabbi relates a story that conveys a religious truth or moral. In midrash, a story itself may have no direct relationship to reality. Such teaching should never be any threat to our faith in the Scriptures. Our faith rests upon the teaching authority of the Church, which guarantees the inspiration and the inerrancy of the Scriptures concerning all matters which deal with the revelation of God and those matters pertaining to salvation.

Regardless of what scholars may say about the literary methods used by Matthew in the Infancy Narratives, we know that the religious truths revealed still stand: Jesus is the Christ--son of David, son of Abraham. He was born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is man--yet he is Emmanuel--God with us. He came into this world to free all men from sin. Men are free to recognize his true nature and come to him for salvation, or to reject him and salvation.

These are truths Matthew teaches us, whether he does so by relating historical facts or through the method called *midrash*. As Catholics, we are free to hold either opinion: neither is a threat to Catholic Faith.

The story is told that some years ago a popular scripture scholar—who had publicly taught that the story of the Three Wise Men was midrash--received a Christmas card; on it was a picture of three angry and irate Wise Men knocking upon his door and demanding to have a word with him personally!

## CHAPTER 4

### THE DESERT REVISITED

#### A PROPHET IN THE LAND

By way of an epilogue, we will briefly reflect upon the problem of moral evil which we encounter in the infancy narratives. In the person of Herod, the massacre of the baby boys in Bethlehem, and the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt we come face-to-face with the problem of moral evil in the world. Likewise, we face God's reaction to evil or, seemingly, God's lack of response to it.

How can we account for such evil in the world as well as for God's providential care of His creatures? It is not a problem we can deal with easily, especially when good people become the victims of evil. In many cases emotional reaction clouds the facts and threatens faith. Evidently evil often triumphs in this world and the good and just suffer and die.

Christian Faith confirms that God loves us and never wills evil upon us directly. Yet evil may come to us, as it did to the little boys of Bethlehem. That particular incident happened precisely because of God's salvific plan: the Incarnation of His Son. Would not one expect--due to the extraordinary circumstances--that a divine intervention would have occurred? Apparently there was no divine intervention, because the massacre did happen. Where was God when this took place? Seemingly headed for the safety of Egypt.

There is a solution, but one not always acceptable. Evil occurs because God permits it, although He does not directly will it. This is referred to, in Moral Theology, as the *permissive will of God*. Evil takes place from a misuse of what God, in His perfect Wisdom, directly and perfectly wills. God wills human freedom and evil occurs because man misuses this divine gift.

God wills to make human beings free, even when knowing that this freedom will be used against Himself. "*Let us make man in our image, after*

*our likeness ... God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26,27).*" God wills this, not only because greater good than evil flows from the gift of freedom, but--being God--He brings forth a *greater* good from the evil that occurs.

Such a belief demands faith for often we witness only the triumph of evil in this world. However our faith offers us a perfect precedent and an example par excellence. What greater evil ever occurred than the murder of Jesus, Son of God in the flesh! Whoever brought greater good to humanity by his physical presence upon earth? Whoever wrought a greater blessing to humanity than Jesus? Nevertheless human beings freely conspired against Him and willfully sought and took his physical life, causing Him much personal suffering. His death crushed the hopes of many good people, *"We were hoping that he was the one who would set Israel free (Lk. 24:21).*" His terrible rejection and fearful death broke the hearts of all who loved him--not the least being his own heart, *"My heart is filled with sorrow to the point of death (Mk.14:34).*"

If God spared the life of His Son in Bethlehem, it was only to save Him for the death on the cross. Would it not have been better for Jesus to have died in Bethlehem with the other babies? It would perhaps have been easier for Jesus, but it would not have been better for the world. Out of the crimes culminating on the cross at Calvary came the redemption of the human race, the atonement of all sin, an opportunity for all mankind to be born anew into the life of God--to be free once again.

That Jesus died in such a fashion was a great evil. God did not will the murder of Jesus--He permitted it! However what great good came from that death! Has any evil of such magnitude ever produced such blessings for the human race? How God must love the human race that He did not even spare His own Son in the plan of divine salvation. Perhaps it will be by meditating on the death of Jesus that we will come to some understanding of evil in our world, and God's reaction to it...

However, we have other lessons to learn here. We do live in a world where the perverse wills of other human beings can injure and even destroy us. We live in a world darkened by ignorance which may cause us to stumble and fall--even fatally. As Christians we are committed to do good and avoid evil. In order to do good, and continue doing good, we



must often prudently avoid evil, whatever face or shape it may assume. As far as possible we ought to avoid evil environments--be they persons, places or things.

To avoid all evil in the world, as Paul taught, "*you would have to leave the world (I Cor. 5:9)!*" Where evil cannot be avoided, it must be dealt with prudently. As we are obliged to will good for others we are obliged, likewise, to will good for ourselves. He who wills an end wills the means to that end. As we would not deliberately hurt another, we ought not to let others deliberately hurt us. We must take the necessary means to protect ourselves from evil. We must seek to safeguard ourselves from the evil wills of evil people. Sometimes we have to fight; at other times the only common sense approach is flight, as did Joseph in the face of Herod's murderous intentions. We read, "*Joseph got up and took the child and his mother and left that night for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod ... (Mt. 2:14-15).*" This was a case of divine prudence in the face of earthly evil.

Nevertheless, we must not think that because evil appears to be inevitable in this world, we live in an environment which God neither penetrates nor affects. He does so, vitally. However, when God comes to our aid, He comes as a Person who respects the freedom of His creatures, even when they misuse it. God's respect for human freedom extends itself to all the bitter consequences and fruits of willful evil. To will the one means to permit the other, otherwise human freedom becomes but a pretense. God respects the freedom not only of His enemies but also of His friends. God will not violate our freedom of choice, even in order to save us. Often it is this independence of our own wills that prevents God from safeguarding us from evil. We ought to seek to keep our own wills in tune with God's will. Much evil can be avoided if we are prudent--above all, this implies being supernaturally prudent. Men and women who are supernaturally prudent always keep a channel open through which God can inspire, guide, and protect them.

Often the only avenue left open to God is a dream. Whatever occurs in the conscious awareness of a human being must come to conscious awareness through that magnificent, mysterious organ called the human brain. It is a gigantic receiving set--to say the least. Whether knowledge comes from the material world or the spiritual world, it must first pass through the brain in order to be consciously known. If God wishes to direct us towards a good or the avoidance of an evil, He needs an open channel through which to do so. Apparently all of Joseph's waking moments were so absorbed in Jesus and

Mary that the only channel open to the Heavenly Father was when Joseph closed his eyes to sleep and dream. Even this avenue demands some peace and serenity of being, otherwise all those unfulfilled desires and suppressed emotions fill up our dreams. Even over-sedation in sleep through chemical means can block the avenue of dreams. It may block not only a spiritual communication, but also the physical and psychic releases afforded by dreams. God often uses those persons who are more intuitive and spiritually attuned to divine inspiration as His instruments in the lives of others. For this reason we ought to seek the advice of people versed in the ways of God and the spirit. The examples of wise men and women of the past encourage us to seek spiritual direction.

Experience will make a prudent person agree with the words of Josephus, the Jewish historian, "*Now if anyone consider these things, he will find that God takes care of mankind, and by all ways possible, foreshows to our race what is for their preservation.*" Josephus went on to say that people perish in miseries they often bring upon themselves by imprudently ignoring God's warning signs in their lives. The Scriptures do confirm to us, "*He has put his angels in charge of you, to guard you in all your ways (Ps. 91:11).*" It has also been wisely observed: Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!

Matthew introduces his readers to the public life of Jesus of Nazareth with the appearance of one John the Baptist in the Judean desert. This man came as a prophet, bearing an Elijah-like appearance, and he dynamically proclaimed to Israel a message of repentance.

At one time in the land of the Jews, the voice of prophecy rang loud and clear. Men on fire with the prophetic spirit, such as Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel roamed up and down the land kindling religious zeal, and calling for a return to the covenant relationship with Yahweh. With their passing from the scene came lesser prophets, such as Obadiah, Jonah, Malachi, Joel. When their voices died down, the voice of prophecy faded into the desert winds, and it suddenly grew silent in Israel. A prophetic hush fell upon the land lasting four hundred years, at which time the profound silence was broken only by *a whisper of the Spirit*, heard in the teachings of the Rabbis. There was a spiritual famine in the land.

As the advent of the Messiah dawned, a whirlwind of prophetic power built up in the Judean desert, soon to come thundering over the desert sands, filling a great spiritual vacuum with God's burning words, and kindling to fire the

deadwood of religious ardor. A promise of God was, about to be fulfilled:

*A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all mankind shall see it together ... A voice says, "Cry out!" I answer, "What shall I cry out?" Go up onto a high mountain Zion, herald of glad tidings; cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.*

*Is. 60:3-6,9-11*

The period of prophetic drought ended and a spirit of prophecy broke over the land of the Jews when John the Baptist "came ploughing across a sea of sand like a steel battleship prepared for war." No gentle breeze, this John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth--a man who, even as a child, lived in the desert. In the desert he "grew up and matured in spirit (Lk. 1:80)." At his birth, the Spirit testified:

*And you, O child, shall be called prophet of the Most High; for you shall go before the Lord to prepare straight paths for him, giving his people a knowledge of salvation in freedom for their sins.*

*Lk. 1:76-77*

His destiny was marked by God before his birth:

*Many of the sons of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. God himself will go before him, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the rebellious to the wisdom of the just, and to prepare for the Lord a people well-disposed ... to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

*Lk. 1:16-17, 79*

Matthew introduces John the Baptist into his gospel narrative with these words:

*When John the Baptizer made his appearance as a preacher in the desert of Judea, this was his theme: "Reform your lives! The reign of God is at hand." It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: "A herald's voice in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" John was clothed in a garment of camel's hair, and wore a leather belt around his waist. Grasshoppers and wild honey were his food. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him. They were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. Mt. 3:1-6*

Matthew abruptly introduces John into his gospel narrative. He presumes his readers know about this man. The Palestinian people apparently did so. We are told that "*all regard John as a prophet (Mt. 21:26).*" As Luke's narrative was written for a Greek audience, he goes into particulars about the origin of John. The name *John* comes from the Hebrew *Yohanan*, which means *Yahweh is gracious*. It is believed that he was born into the tribe of Levi to the elderly Zachary and Elizabeth about a half-year before the birth of Jesus. Tradition places his birth at Ain Harim, a village about three and a half miles west of Jerusalem. It is Luke who tells us, "*He lived in the desert until the day when he made his public appearance in Israel (Lk. 1:80).*"

Since the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls, some scholars have been led to suggest that John was raised by the Essene Community, whose monastery was at Qumran in the Judean desert. This suggestion has been reinforced by the fact that John made his public appearance only a few miles from the monastery, and because he encouraged a ritual baptism commonly practiced by the Essenes. Likewise, John demonstrated some hostility towards the priestly party of the Sadducees, which certainly echoed the spirit of the Qumran monks. However, there is enough difference between John and the monks of Qumran to suggest that he was influenced by them, but he himself was not an Essene, at least not at the time of his ministry. The Essenes did undertake the raising and training of young children with the expectation that they would later join the community.

According to Matthew, John appeared in the desert valley formed by the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. He would have been preaching near the city of Jericho and the Qumran Monastery. The author of the Fourth Gospel speaks of John baptizing "*across the Jordan (Jn. 1:28).*" This would place his area of operation in Perea, outside the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, and under the authority of Herod Antipas, who subsequently arrested John the Baptist.

From the testimony of the Jewish historian Josephus--who was born in Jerusalem about 37 A.D.--we see the extent of John's influence among the people. Josephus writes:

*(John) who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism ... supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified before by righteousness.*

He goes on to say that people "*came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved (or pleased) by hearing his words ... (Antiquities 18.V,2).*"

The wide range and depth of John's influence upon people is certainly suggested by the fact that, many years after his death, his disciples appear upon the New Testament scene. We are told of Apollos, "*a native of Alexandria and a man of eloquence, arrived by ship at Ephesus ... (who) knew of John's baptism (Acts 18:24-25).*" It was at Ephesus that Paul met a whole community of people who had been baptized only "*with the baptism of John (Acts 19:3).*" A sect survived even into the following century, which insisted John was the Messiah. All this creates an impression that the relationship between John and Jesus may have been somewhat different from the impression left with us by the gospel narratives. All four gospels accounts are at pains to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus over John: they make it clear that no rivalry existed between John and Jesus. However, one is left with the impression that a real rivalry existed between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus. Evidently the disciples of both Jesus and John lacked the greatness of spirit that should be intrinsic to these men of God. In the Fourth Gospel, we read this incident:

*A controversy about purification arose between John's disciples and a certain Jew. So they came to John, saying, "Rabbi, the*

*man who was with you across the Jordan--the one about whom you have been testifying-- is baptizing now, and everyone is flocking to him."* Jn. 3:25-26

We find something of this same spirit in the disciples of Jesus: "*Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we tried to stop him because he is not of our company (Mk. 9:38).*" People were comparing the disciples of Jesus with those of John, and in the eyes of the critics John's disciples appeared to be holier. The Pharisees and scribes said to Jesus: "*John's disciples fast frequently and offer prayers; the disciples of the Pharisees do the same. Yours, on the contrary, eat and drink freely (Lk. 5:33).*" Even Jesus noted the difference between the way he and John lived, and the different effects it had upon the Jews:

*... John the Baptizer came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He is mad!" The Son of Man came and he both ate and drank, and you say "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"* Lk. 7:33-34

Perhaps the disciples of Jesus did feel inferior to those of John; they also were comparing themselves to John's disciples. We read: "*When he had finished, one of his disciples asked him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples' (Lk. 11:1).*"

## THE VOCATION OF JOHN

The Gospel proclaims that the reign of God has come on earth in the Messiah. The reign of God signifies submission to the rule of God. We pray for the coming of His reign on earth when we say, "*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" The reign of God presupposes obedience to His will. Disobedience and rebellion are the antitheses to God's reign. To seek first the Kingdom of God implies a willingness to seek the will of God before everything else. Obedience to God measures the degree that He reigns within the human heart. However, the reign of God is not merely the internal conformity of one's will to the revealed commands of God; in the obedient spirit, God is there in presence and in power. Within the obedient soul, we can expect a powerful display of His Presence. In Philippians, we read a most concrete expression of God's reign, "*... he emptied himself and took the form of a slave ... he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross! Because of this God*

*highly exalted him ... (Phil. 2:7-9).*” From the reign of God on earth would flow salvation and eternal glory. The fullness of God’s reign came in the Messiah because he totally emptied himself out and humbly fulfilled perfectly the will of God. God’s reign--and all it implies--was present in all its fullness in the Messiah. An acceptance of the Messiah suggests an acceptance of God’s reign and, subsequently, a participation in the fruits of that reign. However, to reject the Messiah implies a rejection of God’s reign and all that accompanies it.

All four gospel accounts present the role of John the Baptist as one of preparation for the reign of God, for the acceptance of the Messiah. John is first seen fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah: *“A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord (Is. 40:3)!”* Here Isaiah speaks of the return from Babylonian Exile to the Promised Land. In order to return, Israel must once again enter into the desert. The prophet speaks of one who goes ahead of Israel, to make the way back to the Promised Land an easy one. The obstacles along the way are removed; good roads and bridges are constructed for easy and rapid progress. When John preached, it was the hearts of God’s people that were in exile--not their bodies. It was John’s vocation to prepare their hearts and spirits for their return to Yahweh. This gigantic mission fell upon John’s shoulders: first to turn their hearts from the captivity of sin and, following this, to commit them to a way of holiness on a path that led to God. He must preach not only repentance but a way of holiness. It was a priestly role that purified from sin and built bridges to union with God.

The Gospel also intimates, by the description of John’s physical appearance, that he is an Elijah-like character: *“John was clothed in a garment of camel’s hair, and wore a leather belt around his waist (Mt. 3:4).”* We read in Second Kings this description of Elijah:

*The king asked them, “What was the man like who came up to you and said these things to you?” “Wearing a hairy garment,” they replied, “with a leather girdle about his loins.” “It is Elijah the Tishbite” he exclaimed!*  
2 Kgs. 1:7-8

The Evangelists suggest to their readers that John has also fulfilled the popular expectation that Elijah would return shortly before the time of the Messiah to prepare people for the messianic age. This expectation has a scriptural foundation in the last recorded words of Malachi:

*Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible<sup>4</sup> day, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with doom.*

*Mal. 3:23-24*

We may be sure that before Matthew wrote this account he reflected long and hard on the effect the Messiah actually had upon the people encountered by him. Eyes and ears are much the same: eyes behold the same scenes and ears hear the same spoken words. The external stimuli are the same, but the effects upon people are different. Something internal--something within the person--makes the difference. The Hebrews would say it is a matter of the heart; others would say it is the spirit or the mind that makes the difference.

The Light of Divine Revelation shown in this darkened world is the Person of Christ. Many people beheld him, saw his deeds, heard his words. Some hearts received him as dry earth receives the rain. His words fell upon the ears of others like rain upon a tin roof; they rejected everything about him. As the Gospel narratives unfold, these different types of people manifest themselves. (We will find our type among them.)

The Messiah found acceptance, generally speaking, among people from every-day walks of life, and from those people consciously burdened with sins socially unacceptable. He was received among tax collectors and harlots, as well as among simple and sincere fishermen. Men who belonged to the priestly caste, whose economy, authority, and social position rested in their priestly status, rejected him. Men who were popularly regarded as holy and pious, whose reputations rested upon their external observance of the Mosaic Law, rejected him. The members of the major political and religious parties of the time, the Sadducees, the Pharisees and their affiliates, the lawyers or scribes, and the Herodians, rejected and despised the Messiah. Perhaps we could say that the Herodians and the politically-minded people who were affiliated with the power structure of this world did not so much despise the Messiah as they were indifferent to him. They had neither the time nor the energy to serve two masters. They were too busy rendering unto Caesar to be able to render anything to Christ.

Matthew came to see that if the Messiah was accepted or rejected by people, it was not really because they were either simple or sincere people of



the land or sea, or because they belonged to the leading political parties. When a cross section of those who did accept or reject Christ was examined, we found representatives from all parties and all walks of life. It is obvious, however, that there were larger numbers of certain groups on one side of the fence than on the other.

The real distinguishing characteristic between those who rejected and those who accepted Christ was the acceptance or rejection of the call of John the Baptist. Those who listened to John were open to listen to Christ. Those who rejected John found it easy to reject Christ. Towards the end of this gospel account, we see that Jesus confronted those who rejected Him with these words:

*Let me make it clear that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came preaching a way of holiness, you put no faith in him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did believe in him. Yet even when you saw that, you did not repent and believe in him.*

*Mt. 21:31-32*

Possibly, for us personally, this is spiritually one of the most important points in our study of the Scriptures. When we have finished the study of Matthew, we will have heard and seen the Christ, and indeed we will have reacted to it all. We will be in one category or in the other: in a true sense we will have been judged. Christ and his Gospel bring judgment to all who *see* Him and *hear* His words.

## TRUE REPENTANCE

Before we proceed to an in-depth study of this gospel account, let us make certain that we understand one of the most important elements in our personal salvation: repentance!

The understanding of the concept of repentance lies in our understanding of the concept in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew root *sub* means *turning*. Whether it implies *to turn away from (evil)*, or *to turn towards (Yahweh)*, depends on the preposition used. From this root comes the Hebrew noun *tesubah*, which means *conversion* or *return*. This word is translated into Greek as *metanoia* which means *a change of mind*. Most scholars agree that *metanoia* does not mean *to have contrition* or *to do penance*. The meaning of

*metanoia* or *tesubah* is all too engrossing to have such a limited significance.

The Old Testament saw conversion as a moral change in which a person turns away from former sinful conduct and turns towards God by doing God's will. Therefore Biblical conversion is composed of two parts: First, one turns away from evil, which is the negative side of conversion. Second, one starts to accomplish good, which is the positive side of conversion. A person who only ceases to do evil is not converted. A truly converted person manifests good works in his life. Isaiah expresses true conversion and repentance in these words:

*Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim; redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow. Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; Though they may become crimson red, they may become white as wool. If you are willing and obey, you shall eat the good things of the land; But if you refuse and resist, the sword shall consume you: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

*Is. 1:16-20*

The prophet Amos writes:

*Seek good and not evil, that you may live; Then truly will the Lord, the God of hosts, be with you as you claim! Hate evil and love good, and let justice prevail at the gate..."*

*Am. 5:14-15*

Joshua speaks of conversion as turning away from strange gods--from one's idols--and giving one's heart to God:

*Now, therefore, put away the strange gods that are among you and turn your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel. Then the people promised Joshua, "We will serve the Lord, our God, and obey his voice."*

*Jos. 24:23*

Deuteronomy, as well as Jeremiah, centers upon the internal aspect of repentance by speaking of it as a "circumcision of the heart": "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and be no longer stiff-necked (Dt. 10-16)." Paul picked up on this thought in Romans when he said:

*Appearance does not make a Jew. True circumcision is not a sign in the flesh. He is a real Jew who is one inwardly, and true circumcision is of the heart: Its source is the spirit, not the letter. Such a one receives his praise, not from men, but from God.*

*Rm. 2:28-29*

(In our study of Romans we will see that Paul here makes a play on the meaning of the word *Jew* and the meaning of the word *praise*.)

In the writings of Ezekiel we see an emphasis on the complete internal aspect of conversion that produces a complete change in human behavior:

*Turn and be converted from all your crimes, that they may be no cause of guilt for you. Cast away from you all the crimes you have committed, and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, O house of Israel.*

*Ez. 18:30-31*

The prophets teach that the foundation of conversion is the love of Yahweh. We read in Hosea:

*Return, O Israel, to the Lord, your God; you have collapsed through your guilt. Take with you words, and return to the Lord; Say to him, "Forgive all iniquity ... We shall say no more, 'Our god,' to the work of our hands ..." I will heal their defection, I will love them freely; for my wrath is turned away from them. I will be like the dew for Israel: he shall blossom like the lily.*

*Nos. 14:2-6*

It is God's love that makes conversion possible through His grace. Indeed, true conversion is a return to Love and a rejection of all that is not Love!

There are certain characteristics in true conversion. There is an ideal which the repentant person sees as an acceptable goal of life. There is a measured distance between the ideal and the converted person. One must realistically assess where one presently stands as far as the fulfillment of one's ideal is concerned. Conversion always involves a religious and moral act that embraces every aspect of human life. It demands constant change as it involves a constant growth towards the idealized goal. When it comes to true Christian conversion, it must be clear that the content and circumstances of conversion can only be understood in the light of Christ's words and deeds.

Paul saw conversion as putting on the mind and heart of Christ, but they must first be understood. In Christian conversion, God calls forth all the powers of the human soul into putting on Christ. This is an ideal which will be completely realized in the world to come. It demands, in this world, a willingness to renounce everything in order to dedicate one's life to its possession. Because the person of Christ occupies a place that is essential in the divine plan of salvation, Christian conversion demands faith in Christ. One must accept the fact that salvation comes through the death of Christ upon the Cross and by personal incorporation into Christ through Baptism. It demands that one find religious security in one's commitment to the Way of Christ. He is seen as the true Light that leads to eternal life.

Christ says to his disciples, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me (Jn. 14:1).*" Therefore the Christian religion preaches conversion in these words:

*Reform your lives and believe in the gospel!* *Mk. 1:15*

*You must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* *Acts 2:38*

Paul preaches, "*With Jews and Greeks alike I insisted solemnly on repentance before God and on faith in our Lord Jesus (Acts 20:21).*" Conversion continues through the Holy Spirit, and is brought to completion through His Presence which produces faith that works through charity.

## REJECTION OF REPENTANCE

Many of us are accustomed to view John the Baptist as an angry prophet who preached fire and brimstone. We formed this picture because the gospel accounts largely present John in angry conflict with hypocrites. However, we have to bear in mind that John's mission was one of love, and that he could not have fulfilled his mission if he had not been a man of great love. He had a difficult role to play: he was not to be the bridegroom, the lover, but he was to be his best man. The Bridegroom said of him, "*no man greater born of woman (see Mt. 11:11).*"

John prepared the bride for her wedding with her Beloved and led her to the place of final union. As for John's own personality, there was none more detached from self. We have already noted the devotion of his followers and his great attraction to that large mass of humanity called *sinners*. Sinners found him attractive rather than frightening. He gave time to his disciples and taught them how to pray. He taught them a way of holiness which embraced an ascetical life. Luke relates that when people of repentant spirits came to him and said:

*"What ought we to do?" In reply he said, "Let the man with two coats give to him who has none. The man who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what are we to do?" He answered them, "Exact nothing over and above your fixed amount." Soldiers likewise asked him, "What about us?" He told them, "Don't bully anyone. Denounce no one falsely. Be content with your pay." The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah.* *Lk. 3:10-15*

To his converts, John gave instructions as to how to bring the grace of conversion to fulfillment in good works. He taught generosity to the poor, the practice of justice by the avoidance of dishonesty, and the proper use of authority.

However, it was another matter, another story and another man when he dealt with people who made a pretense at piety and a sham of true religion--men who in their hearts opposed the spirit and work of God--men who refused to enter the Kingdom of God, and actively labored to keep others from it. Upon such, John descended like a blowtorch of truth. His words

seared their hypocritical souls, and he mercilessly laid them bare. He did not hesitate to tell them awful truths; they were playing with fire--the fire of Hell. So Matthew records for us:

*When he saw that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were stepping forward for this bath, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? Give some evidence that you mean to reform. Do not pride yourselves on the claim, 'Abraham is our father.' I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire."*

*Mt.3:7-10*

This is not the last time, in the Gospel of Matthew, that the Pharisees and the Sadducees will be called a *brood of vipers*. Matthew perceived them as being sly, venomous creatures, who inject their poison into men's blood-streams--their minds and hearts--turning them away from Christ and leading them to death. John attacked the foundation of their spiritual security, their descent from Abraham. He denied that salvation depended upon pure genealogies and a membership in People of God. He told them that God could raise up true children to Abraham from the very stones; this is often seen as a reference to the Gentiles.

Here John makes a play on words: in the Hebrew language, the word for *children* is *bani m*, and the word for *stones* is *abani m*. John prophesied that the tree from which Abraham came would be cut down and burnt if it did not produce good fruit: "*Give some evidence that you mean to reform.*" Already the ax was paused in the air, ready to swing at its roots. John clearly saw that the countdown had begun for the Nation of Israel. If it rejected its Messiah, the Wrath of God foretold by all the prophets would descend upon an unrepentant nation. This implied that God would lift His protective Hand and Israel's enemies would triumph. As foretold, they would perish by the sword. And it did come to pass. The Wrath of God fell upon Israel in the form of a Roman sword in the hand of Caesar.

John goes on witnessing:

*I baptize you in water for the sake of reform, but the one who will follow me is more powerful than I. I am not even fit to carry his sandals. He it is who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.*

*His winnowing-fan is in his hand. He will clear the threshing floor and gather his grain into the barn, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.*  
Mt. 3:11-12

This text teaches that the baptism practiced by John and his disciples was an external act of purification that symbolized the internal purity of conscience, achieved through true repentance. It is not this baptism that produced the internal purity of the soul. John implied this when he chided the Pharisees and Sadducees for their hypocritical behavior. They gave the external sign of repentance without undergoing a conversion of the heart. The external sign does not mean anything, unless accompanied by repentance. This is why John cried out, "Give some evidence that you mean to reform." Even Josephus, in his account of John, clearly stated that this baptism was not a remission of sins, but only a sign of repentance.

Here it is made clear that John is not the Messiah. The Messiah will follow John and be superior to him; He will be the One to offer a baptism for the remission of sins. John foretold the coming of the Holy Spirit as a result of the work of the Messiah. Sins will be washed away, and the Holy Spirit will be received by Christian Baptism. The mention of *fire* speaks of the all holy Presence of God, and recalls to mind the story of Pentecost. We quoted earlier those words of Peter which express clearly the effects of Christian Baptism: "You must reform and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven; then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)."

The episode of Paul in Ephesus with the community of John's disciples clearly distinguishes between Christian Baptism and the one practiced by John:

*Paul then explained, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He used to tell the people about the one who would come after him in whom they were to believe--that is, Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. As Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came down on them ...*  
Acts 19:4-6

John makes clear that the coming of the Messiah brings judgment. He uses the symbol of the threshing of the wheat, at which time the wheat and weeds are separated; the wheat and weeds are thrown into the air, and the

wind blows away the lighter chaff. John concludes: "... and gather his grain into the barn, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire (Mt. 3:12)."

## BAPTISM OF JESUS

John's invitation of repentance to Israel resounded throughout the land: "*At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him (Mt. 3:5).*" His voice echoed beyond the Judean hillside, up through the Galilean hills and along the shores of the sea. The invitation was heard in the village of Nazareth, and found a total response in the heart of a young carpenter of extraordinary bearing, of whom it could be said that from childhood this young man had "*progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and men (Lk. 2:52).*" Jesus of Nazareth heard clearly the Voice of God in John's call to all Israel. It was a moment long awaited; now His mission began. The tools of carpentry were laid aside, and serene and secure surroundings were left behind...

Jesus left His only earthly home, knowing any return could never be the same. Walking down the hills and along the Jordan River, this solitary figure watched the birds flying in the sky and the little furry creatures scurrying into their holes. He knew the birds would continue to have their nests and the little foxes their dens, but there would be no place of His own to lay His head, nor even a place to hide in. Yet, He moved along, as serenely and steadily as the waters of the rivers moved on towards the Dead Sea. He looked into the blue sky and knew that He who clothed the lilies of the field and fed the raven of the air cared for Him, and all would be well. In his Father's hand rested the universe and, yet, His eye was upon its smallest creature--a sparrow did not fall from the sky without His notice.

How much more worthy was He than many sparrows! A day would come when He would place a child before those who would be His disciples and tell them, "*Unless you change and become like little children you will not enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 18:3).*" Now that He had set His hand to the plow, there could be no turning back, and so He set His face like flint. Never had He felt more like a little child than the day He walked alone alongside the River Jordan to a meeting of destiny with John the Baptist.



Jesus stood on the river's shore and saw the streams of sinners coming to John to be purified in the river waters. Jesus knew it was not the waters of the River Jordan which would wash away the stains of sin, but only a river of Precious Blood. These sinners came to John and the River Jordan with hearts thirsting for righteousness and holiness--a thirst that no river, no spring, or no well could quench. Jesus knew they thirsted for the living water of the Holy Spirit. *"There was, of course, no spirit as yet, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (Jn. 8:39)."* Falling in line with the sinners, Jesus of Nazareth walked into the River Jordan. Much later, a disciple wrote:

*... He pardoned all our sins. He canceled the bond that stood against us with all its claims, snatching it up and nailing it to the cross.* *Col. 2:13-14*

Matthew gives us this account:

*Later Jesus, coming from Galilee, appeared before John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. John tried to refuse him with the protest, "I should be baptized by you, yet you come to me!" Jesus answered: "Give in for now. We must do this if we would fulfill all of God's demands." So John gave in. After Jesus was baptized, he came directly out of the water. Suddenly the sky opened and he saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove and hover over him. With that, a voice from the heavens said, "This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him."* *Mt. 3:13-17*

## CHAPTER 5

### SERVANT OF YAHWEH

#### INTRODUCTION

Jesus grew in age in the village of Nazareth. He matured as Israel's child--steeped in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. Each Sabbath he stood in the synagogue and, with his people facing towards Jerusalem, prayed:

*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.*

Seated with the congregation, Jesus watched with rapt attention as the *hazzan* called forth seven chosen lectors to read and explain the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures were read in Hebrew and a translation was given in Aramaic. *Hazzan* acted as the master of ceremonies. He stood beside the lector and corrected any mistakes in the reading, and he halted the reading if the material would cause shock or laughter in the congregation. True reading was required, and only one verse could be recited from memory. Each lector would be seated after the reading and would offer brief comments upon what had been read. The Torah had been divided into exactly 153 parts permitting the entire Law to be read within a three year period. The last of the seven readers was called the *maphtir* as he read the last lesson, which was always taken from the Prophets. Out of this reading he chose no more than three verses, upon which he gave a meditation or homily. To be the *maphtir* was the most honored position within the service because it gave the lector the opportunity to preach to the congregation. It was the position offered to noted Rabbis. Luke tells us that when Jesus' fame began to spread and he returned to Nazareth, he was invited to be the *maphtir*. He recorded:

*He came to Nazareth where he had been reared, and entering the synagogue on the Sabbath as he was in the habit of doing, he stood up to do the reading. When the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed him, he unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord." Rolling up the scroll he gave it back to the assistant and sat down. All in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him. Then he began by saying to them, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." All who were present spoke favorably of him; they marveled at the appealing discourse which came from his lips. They also asked, "Is not this Joseph's son?"* Lk. 4:16-22

From the time Jesus was thirteen he would have been eligible to read publicly in the synagogue but, until his day of fame, he would never have been invited to be the *maphtir*. The synagogue service concluded with prayers and probably the singing of some psalms, then a final blessing was given (by a priest, if present). The synagogue service usually lasted about an hour.

Jesus treasured all the words heard in the synagogue and reflected upon them in his heart. There, in the silence of his soul, those holy words nourished his mind and formed his spirit. When the fading sunlight ended the labors of the day and Nazareth shrouded herself carelessly in a darkened mantel of starry beauty and slept, the strange son of Mary silently gazed upon the wonders of the night; a strong sense of exile--of not being "at home"--filled His senses. In the poetry of Israel, His heart found expression and release...

*I found the Lord who counsels me; even in the night my heart exhorts me. I set the Lord ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed. Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices, my body, too, abides in confidence ... "You will show me the path to life, fullness of joys in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever."* Ps. 16:7-9,11

*Though you test my heart, searching it in the night, though you try me with fire, you shall find no malice in me. My mouth has not transgressed after the manner of man; according to the words of your lips I have kept the ways of the law. My steps have been steadfast in your paths, my feet have not faltered. I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me; hear my word ... Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings ...*

*Ps. 17:3-6,8*

*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge; Not a word nor a discourse whose voice is not heard; Through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message.*

*Ps. 19:2-5*

In nightly communion with Heaven, His spirit escaped its prison bonds, and he found himself *at home again*, and that strange orphan-like loneliness lifted for awhile.

As the years of childhood passed into those of manhood, Jesus grew in wisdom in the village of Nazareth. The knowledge gathered in the light of study became insight in the night, at prayer. Jesus knew that, even before lived, His life had been told. The story of the Messiah had already been written. Had His life been foretold? Or, had it been preordained? Foreknowing a thing is not the same as foreordaining it. One concept does not necessarily include the other concept. One may know that many things will come to be, but this *knowing* does not imply *willing* them. Was He coerced by God, or directed by God? Was His life a matter of predestination, or was it a matter of human dignity and divine love? When the Potter molded the clay, what was His intention? We see it stated in Genesis:

*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion ...*

*Gen. 1:26*

*The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.*

*Gen. 2:7*

*God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.* Gen. 1:27

Jesus was free--as free as Adam had been. He was free to love God with all His heart, with all His soul, and with all His strength. The revealed prophecies only directed His love, for they had foretold God's Will in regard to the Messiah--and in some cases, merely His foreknowing it. Jesus recognized the revealed prophecies as the indispensable directive of love. His earthly life was not a part assigned in an earth-divine drama, but a vocation to life, freely and totally embraced. Jesus now knew the way: He only awaited the call to begin on The Way! Jesus found the kernel of it in Isaiah:

*If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him ... Because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and he shall take away the sins of many and win pardon for their offenses.*

*Is. 53:10,12*

### THE MEANING OF BAPTISM FOR JESUS

Through John, God invited all Israel to repent. In this invitation, Jesus recognized His call to mission. Jesus embodied Israel: He was its corporate symbol. In Him, it stood or fell; in Him, it lived or died. With prudence, Jesus willed the foreknown. With spiritual insight He selected the best means--within the earthly circumstances in which He moved--to bring prophecy to fulfillment. The fact that He went to John the Baptist, entered into the Jordan River, and was baptized by John were all part of the divine plan.

Matthew, indeed, narrates divine drama. He introduces the star with the word "*appeared.*" The long expected Messiah is present: He is "*Jesus coming from Galilee.*" His first act identifies him with repentant sinners. His true followers will be composed of such as these. As noted earlier, John's baptism was not a baptism for sinners but for repentant people who had renounced sin, and now symbolically expressed their embrace of a new life through a ritual at John's hands. There is an implication that repentance has

produced grace and that the penitents now experience "salvation." As Luke expressed it: "*Giving his people a knowledge of salvation in freedom from their sins (Lk. 1:77).*"

Here, *knowledge* would imply *experience*. However, we can see all this as a symbol of Christian Baptism. It is the presence of Jesus, and His identification with these repentant people that explains the results of the act of repentance. Because Jesus identifies Himself with sinful humanity, the grace of salvation becomes available to all mankind. Whether it was looking into the past--standing in the footsteps of Adam and Eve--or whether it is looking at the present--standing in our own shoes--salvation comes through Jesus Christ.

Jesus had committed Himself to die when He stepped into the River Jordan to be baptized. He, sinless though He was, identified with His sinful brethren, and accepted their burden of sin, which implicitly implied death—"the wages of sin is death!" Baptism was a public sign that Jesus accepted His role as Messiah, as Savior, and all that it implied: obedience unto death on a cross. There, in the River Jordan, Jesus gave a loud verbal "*Amen*" to it all. When John sought to deter His action, Jesus explained it to him to be a matter of "*righteousness*." The concept of *righteousness* in the Holy Scriptures signifies conformity to the divine will in purpose, thought, and action.

When a star of such magnitude in the divine drama speaks for the first time, the audience is expected to take notice. We need to hear that first line well and hear it over again. It should be said of us as it was of Mary, "*Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart (Lk. 2:19).*" Jesus spoke to John in these words, "*We must do this if we would fulfill all of God's demands (Mt. 3:15).*" A more literal translation would read, "*Suffer it to be so now. For so it becomes us to fulfill all righteousness (justice).*" In a word, it is the only *fitting* thing we can do.

This first line spoken by Jesus is of paramount importance for understanding what follows. It best expresses and explains the rest. Subsequently, all of which comes to be--in word and deed of Jesus--will be a product of righteousness, which means it is a fulfillment of the expressed desire of God. As explained, *righteousness* signifies a total conformity to the Divine Will which encompasses one's purpose, one's thought and one's action. Righteousness is the most sublime of all human acts!

This entire first scene is rich with meaning and symbolism. Matthew writes: "After Jesus was baptized, he came directly out of the water (Mt. 3:16)." The words of the Prophet Isaiah are recalled. Here we need to keep in mind that Jesus represents all Israel. We read in Isaiah:

*But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and formed you O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior... Because you are precious in My eyes and glorious, and because I love you. I give men in return for you and peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not for I am with you ...*

*Is. 43:1-5*

As mentioned previously, such obedience has divine consequences and these consequences are immediately revealed. "Suddenly the sky opened and he saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove and hover over him (Mt. 3:16)." The prophet Ezekiel writes, "The heavens opened, and I saw divine visions ... There the hand of the Lord came upon me (Ek. 1:1-3)." Here, it is much more than "the hand of the Lord":

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.*

*Is. 61:1*

#### AFTER BAPTISM

The Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove over Jesus. In Old Testament symbolism, the dove signifies *love*. Jesus' act is an act of total love, and brings to perfection His human spirit. He has become the fitting Temple of God's Holy Spirit--the Spirit of Love. From the moment the mission begins, the Holy Spirit directs and empowers the life of Jesus. The descent of the Holy Spirit may be seen as Jesus' investiture for His heroic mission. God asks not power from humanity for a life of righteousness; He seeks only good will. God supplies the power where there is the good will.

When the evangelist John describes the baptism of Jesus, he places these words in the mouth of John the Baptist: "I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from the sky, and it came to rest on him (Jn. 1:32)." The word

translated as “*came to rest*” carries the concept in Greek of *dwelling, remaining* permanently. What John says is the antithesis of what Genesis says: “*My spirit shall not remain in man forever, since he is but flesh (Gen. 6:3).*”

The statement from Genesis implies that man must die; this, we know, because of sin. In John we read that the Spirit has returned to man in Jesus; in other words, Jesus possesses eternal life. For this reason man can only come to eternal life *in and through* Jesus. This makes Jesus the Personal Savior of every saved person.

Following the descent of the Holy Spirit, Matthew relates:

*With that, a voice from the heavens said, “This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him.”*

*Mt. 4:17*

This declaration from heaven proclaims both the nature and mission of the Messiah. The words of the proclamation intentionally recall the words of Isaiah:

*Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice (righteousness) to the nations. Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench, until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching ... I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of Justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations.*

*Is. 42:1-4,6*

Jesus has been identified as the “*Servant*” of Isaiah’s prophecies. The Messiah is the Servant of Yahweh and will suffer for the sins of the people. “*Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29).*” This Servant who is to suffer is God’s Son. He is the Beloved Son,

for His will is one with the Father. Their hearts beat in unison, united in perfect and infinite love, and the fruit of this Love is the Holy Spirit--Love Personified!



Some Christians stumbled here and taught that Jesus became divine at this moment through adoption. Both Luke and Matthew presented the infancy narratives to refute such a belief. The human life of Jesus began in divinity from conception. In defense of this dogma, the Church entitled Mary as "*mother of God.*" This title implies that there was never a moment when the Child she bore ceased to be God. He became man in time, but He was God in eternity.

Our Gospel deals with God as true man, which implies that Jesus Christ possessed both a divine will and a human will. It is the human will in Jesus that is brought to perfection through perfect obedience to the Will of God. This is not a game of divine charades. God's Son became a true human being in the real sense of the word. Here in this baptismal scene, God proclaims that He:

*Who was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at ... emptied himself and took the form of a slave (servant) being born in the likeness of men ... known to be of human estate.*  
*Phil. 2:6-7*

This *Slave*, this *Servant*, is His beloved Son!

### LIFE IN THE DESERT

In many ways the life of Jesus Christ, as narrated in the Gospel, reflects the history of Israel. Not only does Jesus appear as another Moses, but the Messiah's life, in miniature, retells the story of Israel. However, in Jesus Christ the ending is different. After the baptism of Jesus, we read in Mark, "*At that point the Spirit sent him out toward the desert. He stayed in the wasteland forty days, put to the test there by Satan (Mk. 1:12-13).*" In the episode to follow, we need to see that it is not only Jesus in the desert, but both Israel and Jesus in the desert. Through Jesus Israel reaffirms her covenant with Yahweh. However, this time, because of Jesus, Israel is different.

Let us briefly reflect upon some aspects of that first desert experience. Under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites left Egypt. As they crossed through the waters of the sea, a life of slavery ended. Once freed of Egyptian slavery, they once again became self-possessed and free to

enter into any contractual relationship considered conducive for their welfare. However, slavery had left its mark upon their souls in the form of moral weakness. Only time, with its tests and tribulations, would reveal it. People often have illusions about themselves that cold reality destroys. At Mt. Sinai, Israel encountered Yahweh. Here Yahweh made an offer that Israel found hard to refuse. Israel established a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Soon she discovered that one easy “*I do!*” becomes a daily “*I will,*” which can take its toll on a commitment. The covenant relationship was all beautifully symbolized as a wedding day in which Israel became the beautiful bride of Yahweh, her divine Bridegroom. In reality, Israel is a child and her Lord lovingly seeks to bring her to maturity. When love's first fervor faded and the demands of this marriage grew no less, the bride's goodwill began to falter. It began to manifest itself in little things such as complaints about the wretched food, bad water, and the poor surroundings:

*Would that we had meat for food! We remember the fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now we are famished; we see nothing before us but this manna.* Num. 11:4-6

*We are disgusted with this wretched food.* Num. 21:5

*Would that we had died at the Lord's hands in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread!* Ex. 16:3

*Give us water to drink ... Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?* Ex. 17:2-3

*Why did you lead us out of Egypt, only to bring us to this wretched place which has neither grain nor figs nor vines nor pomegranates? Here there is not even water to drink!* Num. 20:5

Discontent soon led to rash judgments, “*Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water (Num. 21:5)?*” Israel's unhappiness was soon directed against the servants, who were made to suffer. When one servant complained to the Lord of the House, He wisely observed that the servant had only become a scapegoat, “*It is really me that is being rejected.*” Rash judgments soon led to imputing evil motives. “*Out of*

*hatred for us the Lord has brought us up out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites and destroy us (Dt. 1:27)."*

Apparently Israel was in a marriage over her head. The relationship demanded more than she had bargained for, and more than she was willing to give. In this case there was not all that much love to begin with, and there was an unwillingness to be subjected to those trials and tests in which love is exercised and grows. In this marriage between Yahweh and Israel, infidelity and desertion were not too far off:

*While Israel was living at Shittim, the people degraded themselves by having illicit relations with the Moabite women. These then invited the people to the sacrifices of their god, and the people ate of the sacrifices and worshiped their god. Num. 25:1-2*

*Come, make us a god who will be our leader; as for the man Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him. Ex. 32:1*

*Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt? ... Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt. Num. 14:3-4*

The marriage between Yahweh and Israel was, indeed, a stormy one. There were prolonged separations in which things went from bad to worse for Israel. The Bride survived her recklessness only because Yahweh's love was constant, patient, merciful and redemptive. There were separations and reunions, until finally the marriage settled down to a matter of legality rather than one of spirit. It was a livable arrangement--a time of old age and dry wood. Yet, when all was said and done, despite everything the marriage of Yahweh and Israel produced the Messiah, and a new beginning for all concerned. Israel would begin again in Jesus; however this time the desert-experience would not last forty years but forty days, and with a decidedly different outcome.

## JESUS IN THE DESERT

Matthew relates that "*Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil (Mt. 4:1).*" Tradition places the location of the temptations at Jebel Qarantal, which lies west of Jericho. If one stands at the ruins of Qumran and looks to the west, one can see in the distance a monastery

clinging to the side of a lonely, desolate, barren mountain. One would not be surprised to encounter Satan in such a place. That is Jebel Qarantal from where one can set to the east the Dead Sea and Mt. Nebo from whence Moses glimpsed the Promised Land.

The text mentions that the prolonged fast was followed by temptation. Only then did Jesus experience hunger. We read, "*He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards was hungry (Mt. 4:2).*" He was so absorbed in the things of the spirit that the body and its needs were forgotten. Matthew's words recall the experience of Moses on Mt. Horeb, where he received the tablets of the Covenant. Moses relates:

*Meanwhile I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights without eating or drinking, till the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone inscribed ...*  
Deut. 9:9-10

Moses described what transpired during this time:

*Those forty days, then, and forty nights, I lay prostrate before the Lord, because he had threatened to destroy you. This was my prayer to him: O Lord God, destroy not your people, the heritage which your majesty has ransomed and brought out of Egypt with your strong hand. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Look not upon the stubbornness of this people nor upon their wickedness and sin.*  
Deut. 9:25-27

May we not presume that Jesus also spent his time in prayerful intercession for Israel? The expression *forty* runs through the Old Testament, appearing approximately eighty times. As mentioned previously, it was one of those symbolic expressions, signifying an undetermined length of time.

Some have referred to the episode following the prolonged fast as an apocalyptic vision, in which the true nature of the Messianic Mission is demonstrated through the temptations and Jesus' response to them. Although these temptations are centered in Christ, they appear to be addressed to the whole Covenant People. These are the temptations to which the Church would always be subjected. We will first read the temptations as presented by Matthew, and then reflect upon them:

*The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to turn into bread." Jesus replied, "Scripture has it: 'Not on bread alone is man to live, but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God.'" Next the devil took him to the holy city, set him on the parapet of the temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Scripture has it: 'He will bid his angels take care of you; with their hands they will support you that you may never stumble on a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "Scripture also has it: 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" The devil then took him up a very high mountain and displayed before him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, promising, 'All these will I bestow on you if you prostrate yourself in homage before me.'" At this, Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! Scripture has it: 'You shall do homage to the Lord your God; him alone shall you adore.'" At that the devil left him, and angels came and waited on him.*

*Mt. 4:3-11*

Mark simply said: "*He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him (Mk. 1:13).*"

The protagonists in the above drama are Christ and Satan. They are intrinsically and diametrically opposed to one another. In them, reigns and kingdoms struggle. It is a matter of light and darkness. In the Hebrew language, the word *satan* means *to harass*. In its usual context it meant to harass someone by bringing accusations against him. A *satan* was an *adversary*, who harassed people by opposing them or falsely accusing them. As the consciousness of evil developed among the Jews, the title *Satan* was restricted to the devil or the *ancient serpent* of Genesis. All three concepts—*satan*, *devil*, and *ancient serpent*—became synonymous for the same person: a fallen angel, the recognized lord of this world, and the great enemy of God. In the New Testament, Satan appears as the principal and the origin of evil, the seducer to evil, and the great invisible enemy and adversary of the Church, and of the spreading of God's kingdom.

In the desert, Satan manifests himself to Jesus. It is his intention to destroy the Messiah, both physically and spiritually--the starting point of his attack being the spiritual experience enjoyed by Jesus at his baptism, when God

testifies that Jesus is His beloved Son. Satan perceives that the acknowledgment of Jesus' sonship stems from his obedience to God. He intends to destroy this relationship between Jesus and God.

He begins by insinuating that there is a doubt concerning this intimate relationship. By this insinuation, he seeks to instill doubt in Christ. "*If you are the son of God,*" it is easy to prove it to yourself and to others by a visible sign--something more than a *word* that can be so easily misunderstood--some concrete sign, like changing stones into bread. Satan clouds the real issue, which is to subtly divert the will of Jesus from that of God, for this is the foundation of sonship. There is no evil in what is asked: all the evil is in the motive and in the intention. He asks Jesus to satisfy a human need, a human necessity--one quite pressing at the time--to feed the hungry. After his great spiritual encounter, Jesus was indeed hungry. Therefore, "*change this stone into a loaf of bread.*" "*It is easily done by a son of God.*"

Needless to say that human beings are rarely fed by extraordinary means. Bread comes through the ordinary means of human labor: "*By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat (Gen. 3:19).*" Even physical hunger and its satisfaction must not be separated from the will of God. Jesus recalls Moses' words to the Israelites, of how God allowed them to experience hunger and then fed them with an extraordinary food. The Scriptures say that the Lord did this so Israel might know that a person lived not only by bread but by the Will of God.

If Israel sought first the Will of God as their food, all else would be added unto them: "*Seek you first the kingdom of God!*" Therefore it is essential for a true son of God to seek the Will of God as the supreme good and to be willing, if necessary, to sacrifice any lesser good--even physical life. This brings us back to love, and to what a total act of love truly involves. Quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus responds to Satan's temptation: "*Not on bread alone is man to live, but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God (Mt. 4:4).*"

Some see the first test as a temptation to use the powers of the kingdom of God in a self-serving manner--to become a wonder-worker for the enrichment and glorification of self. Many gifted Christians have been tempted by Satan to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit selfishly to build themselves up materially and socially. Their deeds are not evil but their

intention and motivation are. Others see this first test as a temptation to divert the spiritual energy and power of the Church into a remedy for the social ills of the world.

It is indeed a Christian work and a merciful deed to feed the hungry and to perform other corporal works of mercy; they give validity and essence to one's Christian commitment. However is it the essence of the Gospel commission for the Church to become a social messiah--to divert all its time and energy to the redemption of society through the eradication of all social ills? Or is it the essential mission of the Church to divert its time and energy primarily to bring the spirits of men to Christian conversion? Jesus taught that the moral miseries which flood the world all pour forth from the hearts of men.

Clearly it is the mission of the Church to do the Will of Christ--to fulfill the commission it received from Him. That is the only means by which it will live and be a life-giving source and principle in the world. All these other things are important, and they are good things that should be accomplished, but in all this lies the Church's temptation: to reduce salvation to social justice. There is the temptation in the Church to "band-aid" society. However it is the mission of the Church to preach repentance, and to lead men to faith in

Christ in whose name--and in whose name alone--lays redemption and salvation. I feel that the Church of the Gospel saw its mission in the words of Jesus to Saul:

*I have delivered you ... to open the eyes of those to whom I am sending you, to turn them from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God; that through their faith in me they may obtain the forgiveness of their sins and a portion among God's people.*

*Acts 26:17,18*

Certainly such a commission would include social justice, but perfect social justice does not equal eternal salvation.

Whatever direction the Will of God takes, a person ought first to seek the kingdom of God and to do all "in the name of Jesus." We can give everything we have to feed the poor and hand over our bodies to be burned, and still miss the boat as Christians (See I Cor. 13:3). Salvation still comes down to love, and that spells itself out in obedience to the Will of God.

Satan next moves to meet Christ on his own ground: the Scriptures. Satan knows the Scriptures better than most men, and he seeks to impede every line of it. Since Jesus discovers the Will of God in the Scriptures, Satan will use the Scriptures subtly, with the intention of separating Jesus from the Will of God. He starts with Jesus' confidence in the word of God, and seeks to move him from confidence to presumption. He tempts Jesus into forcing God to act in a way He did not ordain to act. Satan insinuates that Jesus' relationship with the Father on this earth implies more than it does. He tempts Jesus into demanding that His Father be the Father his *confidence* implies He is. He wants Jesus to set the terms of filial relationship. In other words: If you are my Dad and you love me, you will prove it by safeguarding me in this situation. However, at the other end, the response would be: I am your Dad and my love for you is beyond question; I have no intention of proving it to you by such a means. If you place such a request, you are on your own, Son!

Satan sets the stage for his test by taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple--probably the southeast corner which arose about 300 feet above the Kedron Valley. In order to move Jesus from confidence to presumption, he quotes a verse from the psalm in which God promises protection to the Messiah, which guarantees that He will not stumble over a stone. Satan tempts Jesus to fulfill his mission through means not willed by God:

*If you are the Son of God throw yourself down. Scripture has it: "He will bid his angels take care of you; with their hands they will support you that you may never stumble on a stone." Mt.4:6*

Satan wouldn't have used this text if it had not been in essence a text guaranteed, by past experience, to make spiritual people trip and fall. Satan urges Jesus to throw himself down on the rock below:

*You trust in God. You believe in the Scriptures. You have heard the word of God as I proclaimed it to you. You have complete confidence in God's word. Go ahead, throw yourself down. Think what such a display of faith and God's protective love will do for your mission--and for God's own cause. Besides, if you do not do it, well it is obvious you do not trust the word of God. You really lack confidence in your sonship and you lack faith in God's word.*

*See Mt.4:6*



Jesus recalls to mind the sin of Israel at Massah, when they demanded a sign from Moses that God was present among them. God had directed them to go to Rephedem, and on arrival they discovered that there was no water there. The people said to Moses:

*Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst ...* Ex. 17:3

*The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?"* Ex. 17:7

Moses had said to the people, "*Why do you put the Lord to a test?*" Jesus responded to Satan, "*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*" Satan quotes the Scriptures and Jesus correctly interprets it. Here we notice the danger of interpreting the Will of God in the light of one scripture without reference to the rest of revelation. Many have quoted the Scriptures and given evil interpretation. Jesus reveals his authority to give the proper interpretation of the Scriptures. Subsequently, His Church would claim the same authority.

From this temptation we learn that miracles, signs, and wonders must not be the condition for our confidence and trust in God. We must have trust and confidence in the Word of God. However, Jesus warns against rash interpretations of that Word. The subtlety of Satan in this regard has piled up the corpses of many Christians. Satan has led many people to imprudent and rash behavior, all in the name of fulfilling God's Word or claiming God's promises. How many souls have been burned out spiritually and physically because Satan convinced them that the Kingdom of God depended upon the fact that they must do it all! We call this getting a *messianic complex*. Even the real Messiah couldn't--and didn't--try to do it all. Even though he knew he was the Savior of the World, he insisted that his personal mission was only to the Jews.

In the third test, Satan clearly places before Jesus a choice between good and evil. Subtlety and deception are not involved in this temptation. There is a bold offer and a naked request for allegiance. The strength of Jesus has been tested and tried in the fire, and Satan senses His spiritual power and the threat to his kingdom. He offers Christ a share in his power. The Prince of this world offers to Jesus the kingdom of the world

in return for personal allegiance and adoration. *"All these will I bestow on you if you prostrate yourself in homage before me (Mt. 4:9)."* Satan would become his god. The cards are laid upon the table and the time has come to end the game. It is a time for expulsion--not rebuttal. Addressing him by his title, Jesus directly confronts the Tempter, *"Away with you Satan!"* He expels and dissipates the Prince of Darkness with the blazing light of truth: *"You shall do homage to the Lord your God; him alone shall you adore (Mt. 4:10)."* (See Deut. 6:13). We read in James 4:7: *"Submit to God; resist the devil and he will take flight."*

Satan tested the loyalty of Jesus' sonship and sought to pervert and destroy his messianic mission. With the Word of God, Jesus defended Himself on both fronts of attack. He used verses from Deuteronomy to demonstrate that the Scriptures had revealed the true nature of His messianic mission. The bottom line was always, and in everything, the Will of God.

Some have interpreted the last test as a temptation for Jesus to become a political Messiah--a temptation to bring God's reign into existence through political power. The reins of earthly powers were extended to Jesus. He was being tempted to take the crown and reject the Cross: such a crown could only be an earthly one. The Fourth Gospel records a scene in which Jesus flees into the mountains, for He knows the people will take Him by force and make Him king.

Some see this as a test to be faced by the Church, in which she would be tempted to take the reins of political and temporal powers as the means to fulfill her mission to the world. They lament that she has not always successfully resisted this temptation, and prophets have been raised up to call her to task. The Scriptures teach that the real battle of the Church is not against human forces. Christians are encouraged to clothe themselves in the armor of God, so that they:

*...may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil ... In all circumstances hold faith up before you as your shield; it will help you extinguish the fiery darts of the evil one...Take ... the sword of the spirit, the word of God.* Eph. 6:11,16,17

Jesus came out of His trials with Satan and walked out of the desert the verified Son of God. The Will of God directed--and the Holy Spirit inspired--His life and His mission. The reign of God had arrived and was confirmed in Jesus. Jesus would now spread the reign of God. On the mountain of temptation, He took the path of deepest humility and placed His total confidence in the Word of God--as a little child would in the word of his father. The Scriptures tell us: "*Be humbled in the sight of the Lord and he will raise you on high (Jas. 4:10).*" The day would come when Jesus would stand victoriously upon another mountain and proclaim: "*Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18).*"

### JESUS BEGINS IN GALILEE

Matthew implies that Jesus returned to Nazareth and remained there until the arrest of John the Baptist. Following John's arrest, Jesus begins His own ministry. We read:

*When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and went down to live in Capernaum by the sea near the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, to fulfill what had been said through Isaiah the prophet: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali along the sea beyond the Jordan, heathen Galilee: A people living in darkness has seen a great light. On those who inhabit a land overshadowed by death, light has arisen." From that time on Jesus began to proclaim this theme: "Reform your lives! The kingdom of heaven is at hand."* *Mt. 4:12-17*

The voice of John had been silenced by the authority of Herod Antipas, but the voice of God cannot be silenced. Where John ends, Jesus begins. He confirms the mission of John by continuing to proclaim the necessity for repentance before accepting the kingdom of heaven. Apparently John did not preach in Galilee, but for the most part confined his ministry to the Jordan area around Jericho. We know from the gospel of John the Evangelist that John the Baptist worked in Bethany, beyond the Jordan, and in "*Aenon near Salim,*" which may have been in Samaria.

Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, the most northern province of Palestine. Galilee is relatively small; it runs about fifty miles from north to south, and twenty-five miles from east to west. The word *Galilee* comes from a Hebrew root that signifies *circle*. The area was literally encircled by pagan nations that swept, from time to time, back and forth over the province. The area was known as the *Galilee of the Gentiles*--a section of Palestine which had always been exposed to Gentile influence. At the time of Christ, Galilee would have been quite cosmopolitan. The area was almost the antithesis of the secluded and provincial area around Jerusalem, and the city itself. It was said that Jerusalem had to be one's destination, since it led to no place else. Josephus, who was once governor of Galilee, gives a glowing report of the land's productivity and the great varieties of trees and vegetation that grew there. The land was all tilled and nothing remained idle. Josephus records that there were 204 villages within the province, with a population of no less than fifteen thousand in each. According to Josephus, the Galileans were fond of innovations and by nature disposed to change. They also seemed to delight in sedition; from Galilee came the Zealots and other political agitators. They were noted for their courage and were said to prefer honor to gain.

Galilee was a fertile field for Jesus to sow the seeds of the Gospel. As Jesus left Nazareth for Capernaum, He is indeed that farmer who goes forth to sow the seeds of which some will fall on rocky ground, some among the thorns, but some will fall on good and fertile soil, yielding much fruit.

We are told that Jesus made Capernaum His home. Capernaum is a town on the north-west side of the Sea of Galilee--Luke refers to this sea as a lake. It is thirteen miles long from north to south and eight miles from east to west. The climate around the lake is very warm as it lies 680 feet below sea level. It is a fertile land and, at the time of Jesus, many trees of varied species grew there. There are nine cities along the edge of the Sea of Galilee. The prophecy quoted by Matthew recalls the words of Isaiah, which foretold the deliverance and freedom that would one day come to these conquered lands. Matthew sees this prophecy being fulfilled by the coming of Jesus--the light of the world.

Jesus' first act was to preach repentance. The word *to preach* comes from the Greek word *kerussein* (to proclaim) the king's declaration. The *kerux* or *preacher* was the *herald* who directly delivered the king's message. It has been said that "*preaching is the application of prophetic authority to*

*the present situation.*” Matthew has presented both John and Jesus as heralds of God, proclaiming His will to Israel.

Once again, the essential importance of repentance--both for the acceptance of Christ and the reign of God--is confirmed. Apparently, where no conversion experience took place, there was no acceptance of Christ, and consequently no opportunity for a truly Christian life. Modern evangelists ought to note--and keep in mind--that repentance is a fundamental step in evangelization. It has been noticed in the lives of many nominal Christians that they have come to a more vibrant religious life only after some degree of conversion experience has happened in their lives. Of course such an experience might not be demanded from those Christians who, from childhood, have walked in the grace of their baptism, and of whom it could be said--as it was of John the Baptist--“*The child grew up and matured in spirit (Lk. 1:80).*” There are blessed souls in the Christian Community who have corresponded with grace from childhood. However experience indicates that a lot of “early born” Christians are in need of a new “born again” experience...

As Jesus preached repentance, He walked alone without disciples. Many, no doubt, admired Him from a distance. A man of such speech and power was indeed a man of God--certainly not a person to be too closely approached, nor one with whom sinful people could associate. Simon the fisherman would one day say to Him, “*Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man.*”

When the moment came to proclaim the Gospel there had to be disciples, for there must be witnesses. The Scriptures tell us that many are called but few are chosen. Matthew records the first few who were chosen:

*As he was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he watched two brothers, Simon now known as Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea. They were fishermen. He said to them, “Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.” They immediately abandoned their nets and became his followers. He walked along farther and caught sight of two other brothers, James, Zebedee’s son, and his brother John. They too were in their boat, getting their nets in order with their father, Zebedee. He called them, and immediately they abandoned boat and father to follow him.*

*Mt. 4:18-22*

Many fishing boats sailed the Sea of Galilee in the days of Jesus. Out of all these boats, Jesus entered two of them from which He chose four disciples. According to Matthew, the first to be called to discipleship was "*Simon now known as Peter,*" and the next was his brother, Andrew. We are told that Jesus had been observing these two men. Jesus next called James and John, the two ambitious and high strung sons of Zebedee, to discipleship. Jesus later referred to these two as "*sons of thunder.*" For reasons known only to the Lord, He selected these particular men and called them into a unique relationship with Himself. Luke saw them as men whom "*he had chosen through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2).*"

Others have noted those special characteristics belonging to professional fishermen, which make them suitable candidates for discipleship. Fishermen must be able to wait patiently and to work perseveringly; they must have courage to be able to brave those elements of uncertainty and danger; they need prudence to know when and where to fish and to be aware of the means used to catch the fish; they must be people who do not attract attention to themselves. All these characteristics are needed virtues for those who are called to be fishers of men.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

#### INTRODUCTION

Some people walk through familiar fields and see only flowers and grass. Some walk the same fields and discover artifacts and rare finds. Natives rarely discover riches in their familiar fields. Their customary environment seldom stimulates them to look beneath the surface appearance. Within the same fields, a searching and knowing eye may perceive hidden treasure. For many of us, the New Testament is a familiar field. We have grown accustomed to it by reading and hearing it read. Perhaps we have grown too accustomed to its face to discover anything new, or make any rare find. Certainly our study of the Scriptures would be more rewarding if we could discover each passage anew, trying to view it as if seeing it for the first time, hearing it as if it had never before been told. We do see and hear much the same things, but we see and hear them as unique receptors. Some see only the flowers in the field--others discover the hidden treasure. We need not so much to see more, but to see more clearly and penetratingly; we need not so much to hear more, but to hear more sharply and astutely.

The call of the first disciples is indeed a familiar field for students and readers of the New Testament. Let us return into this old familiar field and see if we have discovered a hidden treasure, or only see the field flowers. The call of the first disciples certainly will instruct us about Christian discipleship in general.

As a background to Matthew's presentation of this episode, we should observe the accounts of this incident as found in John and Luke. There we discover some of the preliminaries prior to Jesus' invitation to discipleship. In John, we discover that Andrew the brother of Simon Peter, and another person--presumably John the brother of James and the son of Zebedee, were the disciples of John the Baptist. This tells us that they had fulfilled the first condition of discipleship: repentance. They demonstrate the success of John the Baptist's mission; they come to Jesus as disciples of John and as a result of his witness to Jesus. They make an inquiry into the personal life of Jesus:

*“Rabbi” (which means Teacher), where do you stay (Jn. 1:38)?”* This question opens the door for Jesus to invite them into his personal company—to afford an opportunity for all concerned to know each other. Once they experience Jesus, they want to share this experience with those close to them; they immediately become His witnesses. John records:

*One of the two who had followed him after hearing John was Simon Peter's brother Andrew. The first thing he did was seek out his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah!” ...He brought him to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John; your name shall be Cephas (which is rendered Peter).”*  
Jn. 1:40-42

John goes on to relate that Jesus calls Philip to follow Him, and Philip immediately sets off to search for Nathanael and invites him to *“Come, see for yourself (Jn. 1:46).”*

The name *Nathanael* means *God has given*. We discover here that true disciples become makers of disciples. If a Christian has never tried to bring another to Christ, perhaps the genuineness of his own discipleship is in question.

In the account given by Luke, Jesus deliberately entered into the lives of the first two disciples--probably even the first four. Jesus had been about His solitary work of proclaiming *“the Word of God”* and *“the crowd pressed on him to hear.”* At the same time Simon the fisherman and his brother Andrew, with their two business partners James and John, were busy at their work *“washing their nets (Lk. 5:1-2).”* Jesus interrupted *their* work, and sought their assistance in *His* work. Jesus pressed Simon and his boat into service, in order to aid Him in dealing with the pressing crowd. Jesus entered into Simon's boat and requested that he pull out a bit from the shore. There, separated from the land, Jesus continued to teach the crowd from Simon's boat.

This act of Jesus forces Simon and his brother to be involved with Jesus and to hear Him. At this point, there is not too much commitment involved. However, the relationship is not dropped here. Jesus moves to personally impress these men. He knows what impresses fishermen: catching fish. He gives an order that requires obedience and confidence on their part. Jesus orders Simon to *“put out into deep water”* and lower those clean nets. To



which order Simon prudently responds: "*Master (Teacher), we have been hard at it all night long and have caught nothing; but if you say so, I will lower the nets (Lk. 5:5).*" The circumstances are different from the night before: Jesus is in the boat and Simon lowers the nets out of obedience and trust in Jesus. Now the results are different: "... *they caught such a great number of fish that their nets were at the breaking point (Lk. 5:6).*" They cannot handle the work load by themselves; they call their partners in the other boat to come and join them. They are *partners* in this work and together they complete the task.

Simon is more than impressed; he is overwhelmed. Amazing thoughts flood his mind, which quickly give way to fear. Simon has moved from seeing Jesus as *Teacher* to experiencing him as *Lord*, and from seeing himself as a fisherman to experiencing himself as a *sinful man*. "*At the sight of this, Simon Peter falls at the knees of Jesus saying, 'Leave me, Lord. I am a sinful man (Lk. 5:8).'*" In these words Simon describes his essential essence as being "*sinful*"—"I am a sinful man." "*Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men (Lk. 5:10).'*" Obviously he would catch men by the same method he caught "*a great number of fish*"--through obedience to Jesus, and complete confidence in His presence and His power. Luke concludes: "*With that they brought their boats to land, left everything, and became his followers (Lk. 5:11).*"

Matthew and Mark present the most simplified version of the call of the first disciples. However, gems are best displayed in a simplistic setting. They both agree that Simon was the first disciple called by Jesus. We note that all four evangelists confirm Simon to be the first among the disciples. John names him first, even though he mentions that Andrew and John were the first to come to Jesus. Andrew is identified in this fashion: "*One of the two who had followed him after hearing John was Simon Peter's brother Andrew (Jn. 1:40).*" Luke tells us that Jesus saw two boats and He made a choice: "*He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon (Lk. 5:3).*" Away from the land, He teaches from Simon's boat. (Away from the earth, the Risen Savior teaches through Peter.) We are told that the men in the other boat are called to assist Simon because they were his mates: "*James and John, Zebedee's sons, who were partners with Simon (Lk. 5:10).*" At the very beginning, three evangelists refer to Simon by the name *Peter*--that unique name later given to Simon by Jesus. The name *Simon* is the Greek derivative of the Hebrew *Simeon*, which means *Yahweh has heard*. All four evangelists suggest that Simon holds a unique position among the disciples of Jesus. He

holds this position, not because of his personal holiness, but because of a choice on the part of Christ.

Up to this point, Jesus has been going on his way alone. The four fishermen have been going, more or less merrily, on their own way at the business of catching and selling fish. The brothers James and John, along with their father and his hired crew, work in the fishing industry as partners with the brothers, Simon and Andrew. They probably work a large net between the two boats and divide the catch.

### DEMANDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Regardless of what may have been the preliminary meetings between Jesus and the four fishermen at one particular moment, Jesus enters quite personally into their lives and invites the four of them to follow Him. The invitation, if accepted, places personal demands on all concerned. The fishermen are invited to share the life of Jesus. To accept the invitation implies a willingness to leave behind a way of life they know and love. It implies a willingness to embrace an unknown and mysterious existence. It demands an Abraham-like faith: "*Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you (Gen. 12:1).*" Matthew says of Simon and Andrew: "*They immediately abandoned their nets and became his followers (Mt. 4:20).*" He writes of James and John: "*He called them and immediately they abandoned boat and father to follow him (Mt. 4:22).*"

True Christian discipleship demands true detachment--a willingness to abandon anything in order to follow Jesus. Luke relates the story of a rich young man whom Jesus invited to be His follower, but he sadly declined the invitation because his great wealth possessed him--he was not free to follow Jesus. He could not abandon what he had in order to become the person God called him to be. It is a story, no doubt, which ended sadly. The four fishermen left their nets, boats, and father for Jesus. They left their *somethings* for *Someone*, and by doing so they were to become *somebodies* in this world--and in the world to come.

From the moment they accepted the invitation, the disciples were part of Jesus' life--as Jesus would become an indispensable part of their lives. Jesus would always be *the Presence* and they would always be present to Him. Christian discipleship demands presence. There is a conscious

Presence of Jesus in the life of the disciple, and a conscious awareness of being in the Presence of Jesus Christ. Human beings have a need for others to be present to them. When this presence is a proper human one, it confirms the importance of the person. A human life in which there is no other significant presence lacks a proper sense of worth and value. It is for this reason that an individual may experience a sense of loss and uselessness upon the death of an invalid whose care had demanded their total presence. Jesus' presence with His disciples is no here-today-gone-tomorrow relationship. "*Lo, I am with you always!*" Someone asked, "*If nothing lasts forever, what is forever for?*" Christian discipleship is forever!

Christian discipleship demands a particular quality of presence one to another. It creates more of a relationship than the one between parent and child, or teacher and student. A community is created in which there exists a mutual interdependence between the persons involved. They form a union in which there are common interests and responsibilities. It is a community that becomes solidified in feelings and in actions. Christian Community demands solidarity with Christ. Men and women who were incapable of this quality of discipleship were not invited by Jesus into His company. We read:

*A scribe approached him and said, "Teacher, 'wherever you go I will come after you.'" Jesus said to him, "The foxes have lairs, the birds in the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* *Mt. 8:19-20*

*Yet another said to him, "I will be your follower, Lord, but first let me take leave of my people at home." Jesus answered him, "Whoever puts his hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God."* *Lk. 9:61*

It becomes obvious that Christian discipleship demands commitment. The disciple is committed to Christ, and Christ is committed to the disciple. However, since Christ invites others to share this same discipleship, Christian discipleship means community and solidarity with the Christian Community, and commitment to the Christian Community. The union existing between Christ and His disciples is such that it is impossible to separate the love of Christ--or devotion to Christ--from the love and devotion to the Christian Community.

As the life of Jesus unfolds, the price of commitment and solidarity becomes

clearly evident. The disciples of Jesus meet the Cross with extreme reluctance. Since the destiny of the disciples is inevitably shaped by the destiny of Jesus, the disciples seek to direct the life of Jesus in the direction most desirable for themselves. At times they would run ahead of Him—in the wrong direction; at other times they would drag behind—at some distance. It took some time before they would realize that Christian disciples form a community of men and women who would be willing to give their lives in order that others may live.

The call of the first disciples has instructed us concerning Christian Discipleship in general. We know that Jesus is selective, but selection leaves freedom. One must choose to be chosen. Christ chooses His disciples, but the candidate must also choose Christ. The chosen must respond: I, too, choose you Jesus Christ and I will daily follow you. The chosen says one “*I do*” and a life-time of “*I wills!*”

### THE TEACHER AND HIS DISCIPLES

Both Matthew and Mark emphasize that Jesus preached repentance before the call of the disciples. Mark writes:

*After John's arrest Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God! "This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel!"*

*Lk. 1:14-15*

Both evangelists clearly state that Jesus taught only after the call of the disciples. A distinction is made between the preaching and teaching of Christ. As mentioned earlier, the preaching was a herald's proclamation of the Lord's message. Jesus proclaimed “*the good news of God*” that salvation was at hand and repentance in life would be necessary in order to receive salvation. Preaching was a preliminary to teaching or explaining the nature and essence of the reign of God. As the reign of God consists of total submission to the Will of God, that Will must not only be revealed but also properly and fully understood. Remember the teaching of Paul to Timothy: “*He (God) wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth (I Tim. 2:4).*” Mark relates that the four fishermen--Simon, Andrew, James and John--accepted the call to be disciples:

*Shortly afterward they came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath*

*he entered the synagogue and began to teach. The people were spellbound by his teaching because he taught with authority, and not like the scribes.* Mk. 1:21-22

We note that it is *they* who come to Capernaum--however, it is *he* who teaches. As long as Jesus remains upon the earth, no disciple will teach. Preach--yes! Proclaim the need for repentance and the presence of the kingdom--yes! But teach--no! They are disciples; their role is discipleship. They are to hear, listen, question, learn from the Master. One day will be graduation day and then they must be witnesses to the world of all He taught them. One day they would be commissioned to teach--when they would understand the entire message. Presently they are students enrolled in the school of the Master, Jesus Christ.

Jesus was called a *Rabbi*. It was customary at that time to refer to outstanding teachers of the Torah as *Rabbi*. The word carried the meaning of *my great one* with its root in *rab* which meant *chief*. In Aramaic a teacher was called a *rabban* and in the Hebrew *rabbon*. When an *i*, meaning *my*, was added to *rabbon* it became *rabboni*--*my teacher*.

If a young Jewish boy desired to become a teacher of the Law--a scribe--and one day be called *Rabbi*, he had to enroll in the school of a *Hakam*--an ordained scribe. He would pursue a regular course of studies for several years, at which time he would remain in personal contact with his teachers. The student was called a *talmid*--a pupil. The *talmid* learned from the *hakam*, not only by formal teachings, but by observing the way the teacher lived; the students observed his actions and even noted his gestures. From the teacher's behavior they received guidance about ritual matters.

We know that the Jews possessed the Torah and the other Sacred Scriptures. These were written in Hebrew, and it was forbidden to copy them into Aramaic--the language spoken by the people. The Jews also possessed the oral traditions called the *halakah*, which were teachings and interpretations of the Torah. Only a *hakam* could create traditions derived from the Torah. In actual practice these *traditions* came to be respected as equal to, and even above the Torah. They became the authentic interpretation of the Law. The decision found here had the power to *bind* or to *loose* the Jews of the entire world for all time. The *halakah*--or oral traditions--could not be written down. It was considered

the *secret of God*, for it was forbidden to mingle Scripture with tradition. The halakah could only be translated orally from teacher to pupil. However, in reaction to the New Testament Scriptures, the halakah was written down in the second century A.D. as the oral Torah.

At the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was the center of Jewish theological and juridical knowledge. Young Jews streamed from all corners of the known world to sit at the feet of the great Teachers of the Law. At the time of Herod, Hillel came from Babylon to hear Shemaiah and Abtalion. Later Saul came from Tarsus in Cilicia to study at the feet of Gamaliel I. When Hillel became a scribe he had at one time eighty pupils.

When a student mastered the Torah and all the Sacred Scriptures and the Halakah, along with all the methods of interpretation, to the point of being competent to make personal decisions on questions of religious legislature and penal justice, he became a *talmid Hakam*: an unordained scholar. It was only when he reached the canonical age of forty that he could be ordained and received into the company of the scribes as a *hakam* with the full rights of an ordained scholar. From the time of his ordination, a scribe was authorized to make his own decisions on religious legislation and on ritual matters. He could act as a judge in criminal proceedings and pass judgment in civil cases, both as a member of a court or as an individual. The Scribes were authorized in their office because of their knowledge of the divine will. They announced this divine will by their teaching, their preaching, and their judicial judgments. Their teachings, sayings, and judgments were treasured by their pupils and transmitted by *the chain of tradition* beyond the borders of Palestine.

The people venerated the scribes and treated them with great respect and awe. When they passed through the streets, wearing their long mantles with fringes that reached to the feet, people stood up in reverence and greeted them as *Rabbi, Father, Teacher*. They were given the seats of honor at banquets and synagogues. There, in the synagogues, they sat with their backs to the cupboard containing the Torah and in full view of the congregation.

With this in mind, we can imagine the surprise of the people when Jesus, of about thirty years of age and not an ordained Rabbi, began to teach so powerfully. "*The people were spellbound by his teaching because he taught with authority, and not like the scribes (Mk. 1:22).*" The Rabbis quoted their sources for their authority. Jesus is the Source of His authority. The people

called him *Rabbi*, and so did His disciples who looked upon themselves as pupils at the feet of Jesus.

These disciples of Jesus would also one day be witnesses at the judgment of Israel. Jesus brings judgment. The Scriptures warn that those who knowingly and willingly reject Jesus will be condemned. The Law demanded two or three witnesses before a criminal case could be tried in court. The disciples are Jesus' witnesses against Israel. One day, we are told, they will sit as judges over the Israel that rejected Jesus Christ.

After the call of the disciples, Matthew presents a general summary of Jesus' activities. Primarily Jesus teaches. He tours through all Galilee and as His fame spreads, He is welcomed in all the synagogues where they invite Him to be the lector (*maphtir*) who reads the seventh lesson from the Prophets and gives a teaching. Secondarily, Jesus proclaims in word and in deed the good news of the kingdom. Part of this proclamation includes the healing of every disease, illness, pain, paralysis, possession, and lunacy. Truly, "*a people living in darkness has seen a great light. On those who inhabit a land overshadowed by death light has arisen (Mt. 4:16).*" A light of which the Prophet Malachi speaks in these terms: "*But for you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays (Mal. 3:20).*"

It is understandable in the light of His great works, that the fame of Jesus spread rapidly as far north as the Tarsus Mountains, to the east as far as the Greek cities of the Decapolis, to the west up to the Mediterranean Sea, and to the south as far as Judea and Jerusalem. From all these areas the multitudes streamed to Jesus, burdened with their infirmities. Matthew says: "*He cured them all (Mt. 4:24).*"

The people being restored to fullness of physical, mental, and spiritual health through the power of Jesus signify the Presence of God in Jesus--an effect of God's reign. It expresses the goodwill of God for all mankind. It teaches what God truly Wills for us, and intends to accomplish within us, through Jesus Christ. We see what it truly means for God to reign in the fullness of His love. Presently that reign is being impeded by ignorance, sin, and spiritual forces of evil. However God, in Jesus, has His beachhead established in humanity--in this world. He will never abandon this beachhead, but from it His kingdom will spread until all things are again, through Jesus Christ, completely submissive to God. As Paul would write:

*When, finally, all has been subjected to the Son, he will then subject himself to the One who made all things subject to him, so that God may be all in all.*  
I Cor. 15:28

It is wise for us to recall that even though people may be physically healed, restored to sound mind, and freed of evil spirits through the power of Christ, the illness, the lunacy, the possession can return. Once when Jesus cured a paralyzed man, He warned him not to return to sin lest something worse befall him. Jesus tells the story of an unclean spirit cast out of a soul who later returns with seven spirits more evil than itself--the last state became worse than the first. Also, we know that one of the Twelve Apostles became possessed by Satan. One must not only experience the reign of God, but seek to abide daily within it, and permit it ever to increase within one's heart.

Matthew records that Jesus attracted great crowds of people:

*The great crowds that followed him came from Galilee, the Ten Cities, Jerusalem and Judea, and from across the Jordan. Mt. 4:25*

To attract great crowds and to make true disciples is not the same thing. Matthew has already suggested that the crowds came because the news of a wonder-worker in Galilee "traveled the length of Syria." It is one thing to come to Jesus because you desire to be cured of some affliction, and another thing to come to Jesus because you want to be like him. You behold in Him not only life but light. When a person becomes a disciple, it is his intention to become like the Master, and for that reason the disciple spends as much time as possible with the Master.

The picture now presented by Matthew is one in which Jesus separates Himself from the crowd. He ascends a mountain where only His true disciples ascend with Him. The crowd remains below. They are unwilling to go up higher with Jesus--to follow Him. In a word, the men are being separated from the boys. Jesus will teach those who follow Him up the mountain; they are His true disciples; they will become like Him. To them He explains the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew deliberately sets a stage for teaching the principles of Christ--for



proclaiming the principles of the Christian Religion. In this particular setting, the Church receives the Christian Torah. The disciples climbing the mountain are reminiscent of Moses and his faithful companions going up Mt. Sinai to receive the revelation from Yahweh. We are told of Jesus: "*After he had sat down ... he began to teach them (Mt. 5:1,2).*" When a Rabbi taught the Law he sat down as a symbol of teaching with authority. Jesus once made the reference to "*the chair of Moses,*" which the scribes occupied and therefore they were to be obeyed.

On Mt. Sinai, Moses prostrated himself with his face to the ground while Yahweh spoke to him. Here Jesus, seated, speaks authoritatively to His disciples who are gathered around Him:

*How blest are the poor in spirit: the reign of God is theirs.*

*Blest too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled.*

*Blest are the lowly; they shall inherit the land.*

*Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill.*

*Blest are they who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs.*

*Blest are the single-hearted for they shall see God.*

*Blest too the peacemakers; they shall be called sons of God.*

*Blest are those persecuted for holiness sake; for the reign of God is theirs.*

*Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven; they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way. Mt. 5:3-12*

In truth, there is little comparison between Jesus and Moses. Moses received the Torah from Yahweh--the divine Source. Jesus is the source of authoritative teachings. As Matthew makes his presentation he no doubt holds in memory the scene from another day, on another mountain, when Moses and Elijah stood beside Jesus, whose garments had become whiter than snow and a voice from heaven declared: "*This is my beloved Son on whom my favor rests. Listen to him (Mt. 17:5).*" We also know that even while Matthew writes, he beholds in faith Jesus Christ seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. It may not be foreign to his intention for his readers to behold Jesus in glory speaking to His Church on earth, as Yahweh had once spoken to the

## People of God through Moses.

Some scholars maintain that Matthew's readers will never truly grasp the dynamics of his gospel account--most especially the Sermon on the Mount--unless they can properly picture the stimuli which motivated and directed the composition of his work. In order to do so, they maintain, the reader ought to picture Matthew sitting down to write. First, he looks in the direction of Jamnia where the Pharisees have gathered after the destruction of Jerusalem, and where they now vehemently attack the Christian position and vigorously support the traditional position of Judaism as held by the Pharisee party. Matthew is seeing and hearing all that comes out of Jamnia. Then, he looks in the opposite direction and beholds the Jewish-Christian Community, which has suffered from these attacks from Jamnia, and are troubled by their accusations. Matthew writes to refute the one and to strengthen the other.

Since Matthew wrote for a community in conflict with Judaism and the synagogue, he intended-for his readers to see the superiority of Jesus and of Christian Discipleship to that of the Pharisees. However, Matthew did not achieve his aim by a negation of Moses and the Torah, which both he and his readers respected. He demonstrated that Jesus transcends Moses; the first four chapters of his gospel account have demonstrated that someone greater than Moses is to come.

The doctrinal teachings of Jesus are not presented as contrary or contradictory to the Torah, rather, they are presented as bringing the Torah to its completion and perfection. Those who hear the teachings of Jesus, and put them into practice will come to a greater righteousness than that possessed by the Pharisees and their disciples. Matthew records these words of Jesus:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets, I have come, not to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Of this much I assure you: until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter of the law, not the smallest part of a letter, shall be done away with until it all comes true. That is why whoever fulfills and teaches these commands shall be great in the*

*kingdom of God. I tell you, unless your holiness surpasses that of*

*the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of God.*  
Mt. 5:17-20

We know that the scribes and the Pharisees fulfilled the Law by keeping the letter of the Law. When Jesus teaches His disciples that their holiness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees He does not advocate they fulfill the Law by keeping the letter of the Law. Jesus will teach His disciples the spirit of the Law. By observing the spirit of the Law they will never transgress the commandments of the Law.

What Matthew records between chapters five and seven has been called the *jewel* of his gospel account. Popularly, it is known as the *Sermon on the Mount*. However it is in reality a compilation and compendium of the teachings of Jesus. It is more a statement of Christian Principles than a sermon. It is the *magna carta* of the Kingdom--the Law of Christian Discipleship. Nevertheless, many scholars suggest that the creation of this section of the Gospel was inspired by a famous sermon delivered by Jesus during His Galilean ministry that profoundly impressed His disciples, and which Church tradition conserved in essence. They believe that the original sermon consisted of an explanation of the true nature of righteousness. Jesus forcefully taught the people how they must live, what they must "do" in order to fulfill the Will of God on earth, to fulfill God's Will in intention, in thought, and in action. It was a sermon in which He warned against rash judgment, against false prophets, and in which He warned the people about the necessity of practicing righteousness--justice. "*The people were spellbound by his teaching because he taught with authority, and not like the scribes (Mk. 1:22).*" Tradition places this particular sermon as having been delivered on a lovely picturesque knoll lying south of Capernaum and overlooking the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

## SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, which are announcements. Jesus proclaims the spiritual state of being of true disciples. The formula He uses is commonly found in the Psalms, and in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The very first Psalm begins: "*Happy the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked nor walks in the way of sinners ... (Ps. 1:1).*" Jesus begins with the word *Makarios*, which was used in the classical Greek to describe the state of the gods in contrast to the wretched state of men. *Makarios* has been translated as *fortunate*,

*happy, blessed.* At first glance, the Beatitudes may seem to suggest that the disciples have inherited such wretched conditions as poverty, sorrow, lowliness, hunger, thirst, insults, and persecutions, but on the other hand, they simultaneously experience the state of gods on earth. Since Jesus declares this fortunate and blessed condition to exist on earth, in spite of the wretched conditions the disciples presently suffer, this condition seemingly flows from the power of Jesus and as a consequence and reward of discipleship. The implication could be--especially in Luke--that Christian Discipleship has reduced people to this wretched condition. The author of Hebrews implies that just such a condition did follow discipleship. He writes:

*Recall the days gone by when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a great contest of suffering. At times you were publicly exposed to insult and trial; at other times you associated yourselves with those who were being so dealt with. You even joined in the sufferings of those who were in prison and joyfully assented to the confiscation of your goods, knowing that you had better and more permanent possessions.* Heb. 10:32-34

The author of Hebrews mentions the existence of a spirit of joyfulness amidst these afflictions. We read of the Christian Community in Smyrna:

*I know of your tribulations and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander you endure from self-styled Jews who are nothing other than members of Satan's assembly. Have no fear of the sufferings to come.* Apoc. 2:9

We also read in the Acts, that the Sanhedrin ordered the Apostles to be whipped, and then "*The apostles for their part left the Sanhedrin full of joy that they had been judged worthy of ill-treatment for the sake of the Name (Acts 5:41).*" The implication is that these conditions resulted directly from being disciples, and the reward of suffering them on earth is spiritual joy here and the assurance of complete justice--not for a time, but for eternity--in the kingdom of God. A reward guaranteed, here and now, by the word of Christ.

However, these Beatitudes appear in Matthew in such a way as to be applicable to a disciple of Jesus in every age and condition. Matthew presents these conditions of discipleship as spiritual and moral conditions rather than

physical and economic ones as in Luke. For Matthew, true Christian Discipleship creates a unique type of human being, which implies a new spirit that produces good and rare fruit. Jesus proclaims the present condition of true discipleship to be a fortunate one, truly a blessed one, for the final rewards of discipleship are unsurpassed. He enumerates the conditions produced by discipleship and their corresponding rewards.

As we review the Beatitudes, we see a strange dimension in which joy and suffering are interwoven. That seems so foreign to human experience. However, when we realize that a disciple seeks to imitate the Master, this combination of joy amidst suffering becomes clearer. This was Jesus' experience. There was Calvary and there was Easter Sunday and the joy of the Resurrection. As a disciple seeks conformity with Christ, the disciple cannot escape some degree of Calvary. However, no disciple goes the experience alone. There is an experience of the Presence of the victorious Christ--the Easter joy--in the midst of the sufferings of discipleship. It is the Lord's gift to those who conform their lives to the Will of God in the name of Jesus.

The first Beatitude truly expresses the foundation of Christian Discipleship--humility. "*Blest are the poor in spirit*" describes the poverty of soul which is fully conscious of the impotence and the emptiness of all human resources, and experiences a radical and ultimate need and desire for the presence and power of God. The poor in spirit truly experience self as powerless before God, and are totally dependent upon God for existence. It is that spirit that is called in the Old Testament *spirit of anawim*. It is the spirit of *the little ones* of this world who, because of the circumstances of life, can trust and depend upon God alone for support. Mary expressed perfectly the spirit of anawim when she prayed:

*My spirit finds joy in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness; all ages to come shall call me blessed. God who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is his name.*

*Lk. 1:47-49*

Jesus teaches that it is men and women of such spirit who will enter into the reign of God. Later, Jesus tells the chief priests and elders of the people much the same thing:

*Let me make it clear that tax collectors and prostitutes are*

*entering the kingdom of God before you.*

*Mt. 21:31*

The poor in spirit are those who are not only open to accomplish the Will of God, but who see the Will of God as the supreme good, and the goal of their life. Such a quality of soul not only makes them eligible for the Kingdom of God, but it actually creates the reign of God on earth. The Kingdom of God consists precisely of such persons.

In the face of moral evil in this world, the anawim spiritually suffer. They mourn over the rejection of God's will. They experience real anguish in the face of unrepentant sin. They know that such evil cannot but bring sorrow to people and to nations. Isaiah spoke of such when he wrote:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me ... He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted ... to comfort all who mourn ... to give them oil of gladness in place of mourning, a glorious mantle instead of a listless spirit.*

*Is. 61:1-3*

Jesus says: "*Blest too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled (Mt. 5:4).*" This blessing comes not because of sorrow itself, but because of the reason for the sorrow: it is sorrow and pain experienced by those who love God and the good of their neighbor in the face of moral evil.

It follows that such souls truly experience a real hunger and thirst that God's will be accomplished in their own lives, and in the lives of others. It is a hunger and thirst of the soul for true holiness. When such souls experience their own lack of conformity to the will of God, they experience a true emptiness of spirit and restlessness; there is a void and hunger that only perfect conformity to God's will can fill and satisfy. They long for the food of which Jesus spoke to his apostles:

*I have food to eat of which you do not know ... Doing the will of him who sent me and bringing his work to completion is my food.*

*Jn. 4:32,34*

Jesus promises to such souls that they will not sorrow, hunger or thirst in vain: they shall experience true holiness and the fullness of God's saving power.

In the face of these earthly evils--that cause sorrow of soul, and leave a

hunger and thirst for God's will, Jesus teaches the way to peace of heart: "*Learn of me,*" he says, "*for I am meek and humble of heart*" The meek person is one who will wait on the Lord. The meek person is not a weak person, but a person of controlled power who does not impede the saving will of God through inordinate zeal and impetuosity of spirit. The meek man becomes God's instrument for peace on earth. Jesus teaches Christians meekness when he says:

*You have heard the commandment, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." But what I say to you is: offer no resistance to injury. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other.*

*Mt. 5:38-39*

Obviously such meekness is not weakness but an exercise of the greatest strength of will. This Beatitude echoes Psalm 37:11: "*But the meek shall possess the land, they shall delight in abounding peace.*" In a most unique way this beatitude has been realized in Jesus who is Lord of both heaven and earth. "*Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18).*" Father Judge used to say that you could never get the best of a meek person. You fuss and fume but the meek person remains as calm and placid as a sunny day. You get mad because he or she won't get mad.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUE DISCIPLESHIP

In a sense we can say that spiritual suffering, thirst, and hunger, and meekness of spirit are the passive characteristics of the poor in spirit--whereas mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and perseverance in holiness are the more active and positive characteristics of the poor in spirit--all of which are characteristics of true discipleship. The spirit of mercy and compassion moves the soul to identify completely in the suffering of others. The merciful do not remain outside the suffering of others but enter into that suffering, and seek to bring solace and ease. Mercy is characterized in Matthew as the ability to give to others and to forgive others. The merciful give alms and assistance in order to relieve the pain and distress of others; they forgive the faults, failings and sins of others. Mercy is the special characteristic of Yahweh and it, indeed, makes a soul most like God. It is mercy that best explains the Incarnation of God's Son: In Jesus, God comes and stands in our shoes, assumes our nature, and suffers the pain of our sins that we might be healed. It is said that only those who can stand above justice can be merciful. The exercise of mercy

creates a capacity within the human spirit to receive divine mercy. Those who are merciful in this world will experience the mercy of God in their lives.

The Pharisees were mostly concerned about external purity--ritual purity. Jesus teaches that true impurity comes from the hearts of men that are the true sources of evil thoughts and desires. When these thoughts and desires clothe themselves in human willpower, man accomplishes evil on earth. True purity is a matter of heart, therefore, it is truly a matter of thought and desire. If a man is to be externally pure and truly acceptable to God, he must first of all be pure of heart. In the human heart lies the true judgment of every man's deed. God sees and weighs the secret movements of every heart. Paul once wrote:

*... their thoughts will accuse or defend them on the day when, in accordance with the gospel I preach, God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.* *Rm. 2:15-16*

Purity of heart is found in singleness of purpose, thought, and intention. Only the heart that truly seeks that God's Will be done on earth as in heaven is completely pure.

Before the Lord enters a human life, He first speaks "*Peace!*" to its troubled waters. The environment in which God dwells and works is *Shalom*. *Shalom* is literally *wholeness*. *Shalom* is the perfect blessing as it expresses that perfect state of being in which all things are as they should be when harmony exists within all things. *Shalom* most signifies the inner life of God. For this reason, those who are the makers of *Shalom* in this world, and that seek to establish and conserve it--in their lives and in the lives of others--are rightly recognized to be the true children of the heavenly Father. They are the *sons of God*.

The Beatitudes begin and end by identifying those who belong in the Kingdom of God: the poor in spirit and those who persevere in this spirit despite persecution in the world. True holiness is the fulfillment of God's will. The souls who continue to accomplish the will of God despite the persecutions, the insults, and the slanders of evil people are truly holy people. It is they who establish God's reign on earth and who will share in the fullness of its joy. The true disciples of Jesus are men and women of the spirit--men and women whose spirits are totally submissive to the



will of God, and are directed and empowered in all their actions by the Spirit of God. Such men and women are willing to endure suffering, deprivation and persecution in order to cling to the will of God and persevere in doing good in the face of evil. To these disciples, the Master says:

*Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven; they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way.*

*Mt. 5:12*

## CHAPTER 7

### LITTLE LESS THAN ANGELS

#### INTRODUCTION

God appeared to Moses in the desert at Horeb. There He identified Himself as “*I AM WHO AM!*” He added to this: “*You shall tell the Israelites: ‘I AM sent me to you.’*”

In the Hebrew language, the name of God is pronounced *Yahweh*. God continued to speak to Moses:

*The Lord, the God of your Father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations.* *Ex. 3:14-15*

It is held that *Yahweh* is but the first part of the name and that the full name is *Yahweh-aser-yihweh*, which means: *He brings into being whatever comes into being*. This divine revelation makes known the identity of God. He is the Existent One who creates all things. *Yahweh* is the power and the force of the universe. In Him all things depend for their existence; in Him all things continue in existence. *Yahweh* is Fullness of Being--Infinite Shalom.

This revelation identifies God as a Personal Being who wills to communicate Self. *Yahweh* wills to communicate with His creation; He enters into a personal relationship with human persons. Scripture reveals this in the encounter with Moses, and with *Yahweh* identifying Himself as the God of people--Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the quality of God's communication with people which best identifies His divine character. John the Evangelist expresses it in three words: “*YAHWEH IS LOVE!*” Three words express it, but infinity of words could not explain it.

In *Yahweh's* dealing with mankind, we discover something of the meaning and the power of love. We see its action in the universe, and experience it within our own lives. That day at Horeb, God committed Himself to an on-going personal relationship with human beings; this relationship would one day ultimately express itself in God's becoming man in Jesus, and redeeming

the world through the life and death of Jesus. In Jesus, divine Love incarnated Itself. The acts of Jesus define true love, and show to people the Way to true life--eternal life in God.

Yahweh invited Moses to come and meet Him on Mt. Sinai. In spirit, on Sinai, Moses communicated with God. Earthly life and time ceased as Moses passed in spirit into the realm of divine communication. Like discarded old clothes, his body lay on the ground--forty days and forty nights, without food or drink. Moses had entered a timeless moment. All around him the clock of time continued its course and people said: "... as for the man Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him (Ex. 32:1)." What had become of Moses was beyond telling, he had seen what eye cannot see and heard "*words which cannot be uttered, words which no man may speak (2 Cor. 12:4).*"

There is a realm of the spirit and there is a realm of the flesh. Human existence encompasses both realms. Many human beings live as if human existence was purely physical. To them, living is filling up their senses. The sights, the sounds, the smells, the tastes, the touches of the earth comprise and compose their conscious awareness to such a degree that the experience of self is completely sensual and earthly. To consciously experience oneself as only a physical being is to be only half conscious of self.

Seemingly, it is rare to find human beings who consciously experience themselves as essentially spiritual beings. Such people, from time to time, transcend the physical and stand, in spirit, outside and beyond it. They behold the naked reality of their being--freed from the clothing of their physical "*tent*"--like butterflies freed of their cocoons. With the eyes and ears of the spirit, they see and hear what "*Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him (I Cor. 2:9).*" For an eternal moment, particular people can, in spirit, escape time and earthly reality. However--be it for a moment or forty days and nights, or four hundred years of earthly time--this separation of spirit from the body is temporary. God created the human soul to be housed within its *tent*--the human body. Nevertheless, Paul teaches that this *tent* of the body can change from being an earthly and natural body to becoming a heavenly and spiritual one. Paul writes:

*There are heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies. The splendor of the heavenly bodies is one thing, that of the earthly another. The sun has a splendor of its own, so has the moon, and the stars have theirs. Even among the stars, one differs from another in brightness ... If there is a natural body, be sure there is also a spiritual body.* I Cor. 15:40-41,44

Paul teaches that we begin in the flesh as children and descendants of Adam, but that we ought to end in the spirit as disciples and heirs of Christ:

*....Adam, the first man, has become a living soul; the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit. Take note, the spiritual was not first; first came the natural and after that the spiritual. The first man was of earth, formed from dust, the second is from heaven. Earthly men are like the man of earth, heavenly men are like the man of heaven. Just as we resemble the man from earth, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.* I Cor. 15:45-49

Paul teaches us that Jesus is the “man of heaven” and the Source of the life-giving spirit. As disciples we are called to bear, on earth, “the likeness of the man from heaven.”

Jesus, “the man of heaven,” ascends the mountain, and he calls disciples to follow Him. The disciples separate themselves from the crowd to which they previously belonged, and they ascend the mountain behind Jesus. The crowd itself remains below--with Adam. They choose to remain earthly people; theirs will be the reign of the senses, passions, and physical appetites. Paul describes their choice and its effects in these words to the Philippians:

*Unfortunately, many go about it in a way which shows them to be enemies of the cross of Christ. I have often said this to you before; this time I say it with tears. Such as these will end in disaster! Their god is their belly and their glory is in their shame. I am talking about those who are set upon the things of this world. As you well know, we have our citizenship in heaven; it is from there that we eagerly await the coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body, by his power to subject everything to himself.* Phil. 3:18-21

## LESS THAN AN ANGEL

When we speak of becoming spiritual beings, let us keep one fact in mind: God became man. *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory; the glory of an only Son coming from the Father filled with enduring love (Jn. 1:14)."* In Jesus Christ, God remains forever human. A human being can be *"filled with enduring love"* and glorify God. We do not become less human when we come to Christ and to holiness. Holiness and humanity are not antitheses; one does not exclude the other--an incompatible couple. Humanity and holiness are capable of having a perfect marriage. Christ came to create a holy humanity.

When people accept the call to discipleship, they must separate from the crowd and ascend the mountain after Jesus. They submit themselves to the reign of God which begins in their human spirit--infused and empowered with the Holy Spirit. They cannot cease to be human beings; their goal cannot be to become angelic beings. To seek to live a purely spiritual life in a human body is more than God intended for us or gave us the power and the grace to be. It speaks of pride of soul and discontent with God's creative will. Such ambition speaks of the sin and the spirit of Lucifer. No! A person does not ascend the mountain of discipleship to become less human, but to become humanly perfect--a perfect human being, not a quasi-angel. The psalmist sang:

*When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you set in place—What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor.*

*Ps. 8:4-6*

We have been created less than angels, and there we must be content to stand.

To be asked to leave behind an earthly person is not the same as being asked to leave behind a human person. The earthly person, in truth, lives only a partial human life. Jesus Christ is *true man*. He is true man in the sense of *true* as in the Fourth Gospel--the *eternally real*--but he is not an earthly person. Christ calls a person into discipleship to awaken the spiritual dimension of the human soul. Through such an awakening the human personality can be perfected, and a person endure forever.

When Jesus calls a disciple from out of the crowd, this person needs to be reoriented as to goals, use of time, and energy. Jesus seeks to properly orient His disciples. Life's time and human energy are premium qualities not to be used imprudently. So Jesus teaches:

*Do not lay up for yourselves an earthly treasure. Moths and rust corrode; thieves break in and steal. Make it your practice instead to store up heavenly treasure, which neither moths nor rust corrode nor thieves break in and steal. Remember, where your treasure is, there your heart is also.*

*Mt. 6:19-22*

The soul is with the heart: what fills the heart possesses the soul. Where your heart is you will discover that the energy of your soul is invested also. Jesus goes on to destroy the illusion that a disciple can have two teachers, follow two dreams at the same time, and have their cake and eat it too:

*No man can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other or be attentive to one and despise the other. You cannot give yourself to God and money. I warn you, then: do not worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing. Is not life more than food? Is not the body more valuable than clothes?*

*Mt. 6:24-25*

We ought to note that Jesus is not speaking of not working here, but of not worrying about life's necessities—"Do not worry!" He is speaking of the useless expenditure of time and energy in worry and anxiety. People have burned out their bodies and souls over worries and anxieties. Recall the words of Mark Twain: "I suffered many things in life and most of them never happened!" Yes--we live in a world of things and within bodies which need many things daily. Spirits as well, in their own way, need many things. They, too, feed upon the world around them.

Jesus knows that if the disciples do not trust their Teacher, no one is going to trust Him anyway. Jesus asks for a vote of confidence; surely nothing really happens in the field of discipleship until he gets that vote. He sees evidence for trust and confidence. He tells his disciples:

*Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap; they gather nothing into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more important than they? Which of you by worrying can add*

*a moment to his life-span? As for clothes, why be concerned? Learn a lesson from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work; they do not spin. Yet I assure you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was arrayed like one of these. If God can clothe in such splendor the grass of the field, which blooms today, and is thrown on the fire tomorrow, will he not provide much more for you, O weak in faith! Stop worrying, then over questions like, "What are we to eat, or what are we to wear?" The unbelievers are always running after these things. Your heavenly Father knows all that you need. Seek first his kingship over you, his way of holiness, and all these things will be given you besides. Enough, then, of worrying about tomorrow. Let tomorrow take care of itself. Today has troubles enough of its own.*

*Mt. 6:26-34*

### LAMP OF TRUTH

It has been said that the things that cause us to fall tomorrow are the problems we ignore today. Meeting the problems of each day is the best preparation for each tomorrow. We need to reiterate, for the sake of the Christian grasshoppers in the Community, that Jesus is not teaching that Divine Providence will put lazy Christians on Heavenly Welfare. God's assurance is to those who prudently seek to provide for themselves and their families every day. Anyone in doubt about this interpretation needs only to hear the words of Paul to the Thessalonians to be confirmed in its truth:

*You know how you ought to imitate us. We did not live lives of disorder when we were among you, nor depend on anyone for food. Rather, we worked day and night, laboring to the point of exhaustion so as not to impose on any of you. Not that we had no claim on you, but that we might present ourselves as an example for you to imitate. Indeed, when we were with you we used to lay down the rule that anyone who would not work should not eat. We hear that some of you are unruly, not keeping busy but acting like busy-bodies. We enjoin all such, and we urge them strongly in the Lord Jesus Christ, to earn the food they eat by working quietly.*

*Thes. 3:7-12*

It should also be noted that Jesus said the "*heavenly Father knows all that you need.*" The promise is to take care of our *needs*, it says nothing of our *wants*. Jesus calls to earthly men and women, "*Come follow me!*" It is an invitation to become spiritual people and to share in the fullness of redemption. Most of the people called experience themselves more as earthly creatures than spiritual beings. The in-breaks of the spiritual into their conscious awareness are rare--or truer still--rarely perceived. Many unidentified "*strange*" thoughts and ideas--haunting feelings and inspiration--come from one's spirit. A heart created for the Infinite cannot but experience some spiritual pain and nausea from being filled with "junk food" and the pods for the pigs.

As spiritual beings, we possess a capacity to experience God. We have our spiritual goals, but these are rarely reached. More often than not the spiritual capability remains, more or less undeveloped within people. Much about God is never known because we are not open to the experience of knowing God--our spiritual faculties are often shut down. Jesus teaches His disciples:

*You are the light of the world ... your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father.*  
*Mt. 5:14,16*

This demands that we know divine truth, and that this truth be so integrated into our souls that our human behavior reflects it. Then we become a lamp of truth--a beacon of light in a darkened place. Of course, in order to do all this, the human spirit must become a proper receptor for divine truth. Jesus uses the human eye as an illustration:

*The eye is the body's lamp. If your eyes are good, your body will be filled with light; if your eyes are bad, your body will be in darkness.*  
*Mt. 6:22*

In order to see, we must have both external light and good eyes. As a lamp, the eyes carry the images of light to the darkened mind; in the light of these images coming from the external world, the human mind is able *to see*--to truly understand reality. However, if the eyes are bad they leave the mind in visual darkness. Jesus observes: "*And if your light is darkness, how deep will the darkness be (Mt. 6:23).*" Jesus teaches that if we perceive things falsely and erroneously, our spirits will be in darkness. If untruths become our guiding lights, how deep will we be led into the darkness of error. In the end



how far will we be from God who is true Light! People without truth become lamps without lights--and none knows where the pit or the edge of the cliff is. Paul teaches that all men can come to know saving divine truths from created nature:

*Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity have become visible, recognized through the things he has made.* *Rm. 1:20*

Paul confirms the teaching found in the Book of Wisdom:

*For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing him who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan ... For from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen.* *Wis. 13:1,5*

Scriptures insist that the invisible realities of God can be known to a degree, by way of analogy, through studying creation. Today we are not so much in darkness as far as the nature of God is concerned, as we are in darkness about our own human nature--particularly the human spirit. If the created and visible world can aid mankind in knowing the non-created, invisible God, then certainly this same created and visible world can assist us in knowing and understanding the created but invisible world of the human spirit--by the same process of analogy.

Some believe that by understanding life at its most primitive source we will best understand life in its highest form of evolution. Let us return briefly to the science class. We might, perhaps, come to some wonderful insights that may have a practical application to the Sermon on the Mount. We will let a great Christian and scientist, Father Teilhard, review for us the mysteries of existence.

Scientific research has discovered that the atom is the smallest self-existing element in creation. All things are composed of atoms. The atom itself consists of electrons--in other words *energy* or *active power*. The energy of the atom is a unifying power. When the energy of one atom passes to another atom, a transformation occurs in both atoms. Every atom is changed through inter-atomic relationship. An atom is either enriched or exhausted in the course of this exchange of energy.

Every existing being possesses this mysterious and creative energy. This fundamental energy has been discovered to be twofold: there is a tangential or *touching* energy that proceeds from the atom linking it with all others in the same order, and there is radial energy which acts like a magnet, drawing the atom forward into greater complexity and unification. The association with neighboring particles through tangential energy increases its radial energy.

It has been discovered that the radius of action for energy is not measured by the limited dimensions of the being. The radius of the action of energy is measured by its power to influence the surrounding environment. Science makes the astounding claim that the radius of action of each cosmic element is the limit of space itself. For all practical purposes, it is infinite. Each of these existing bodies radiates energy, and this radiation of energy causes different combinations in matter--combinations never repeated in nature. This results in more organized forms of matter.

Progress in nature always results from an expenditure and loss of energy. One thing is constructed in nature at the price of an equivalent destruction. Science makes another interesting discovery: higher forms of matter do not automatically result from a simple combination and proper positioning of the atoms—rather, a mysterious identity must absorb and cement them into *composition*. This occurs through a higher external force, above the combining elements, which dominates them and incorporates them into a higher form for their own good and the good of the higher power.

Science discovered an amazing interdependence of all created elements in the world. Each element of the created universe is positively woven from all the others. Also, *the world does appear to be held together from above and not below. The universe holds together as a whole, in one piece.* There is a unifying and fundamental unity in the created universe. The energy of all beings--by some fundamental law--moves towards unification, unity. However, each existing being *extends and pushes its roots into the past*--each existing thing, in its most extreme extension of itself, has existed from the very first times. *Each new being has and must have a cosmic embryogenesis. This in no way invalidates the reality of its own historic birth.*

Science discovered that profound changes occur in nature after--and only after--a prolonged period of maturation. Given this time for maturing, nature inevitably produces something quite new. Nature makes certain, unexplainable leaps in transformation in which something new appears. Such a gigantic leap in nature produces the cell—that *natural granule of life*. Life properly begins with the cell; in the cell of life we pass from the world of physics into the world of biology. The cell is the smallest living substance. It has such mysterious complexity that it still contains secrets, and remains an enigma to science. It is uniform and it is complex. Within the cell, the stuff of the universe reappears once again with all its characteristics. From the cell of life myriads of living things develop on earth, from protozoan to mankind.

It is in mankind that the most amazing phenomenon occurs--conscious awareness. Within beings, conscious awareness reveals a world of power and energy. This inner power cannot be identified with material, biological energy. Its actions are both dependent and independent of matter. Its inner force is recognized as spiritual energy, its source being within the human soul. This spiritual entity possesses what is called a Mind--distinct in power and in action from the brain--by which it thinks, reasons, analyzes, knows existing things and itself. It possesses an inner power for self-determination called *free will*. It freely and knowingly projects its power and energy to a chosen object or goal. There is an obvious interdependence between the spiritual and the physical, and an obvious independence also. A person must eat in order to think, but the calories consumed are indifferent to the thoughts they are needed to produce. From the calories of one piece of bread comes a myriad of thoughts. As mentioned earlier, all energy is basically physical. This physical energy is transformed, by some mysterious process, into spiritual energy or power. It has been scientifically observed that only a minute fraction of physical energy is used in thinking, which is the highest exercise of spiritual energy.

Man is not independent of the physical universe, neither in origin nor in operation, despite having a spiritual dimension; nor is the physical universe independent of mankind's actions. Man is not a self-existing being. He is not a god but is a creature as is the rest of creation--a being little less than angelic. As Genesis indicates, his creation is unique and special. Biologically, man comes from the earth—"the Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground." His spiritual dimension results from a unique

creative act. Genesis expresses it in this fashion: "*And (God) blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being (Gen. 2:7).*"

The same forces and powers of nature work in man as in the rest of created nature. Man is subject to the same laws. However, man is unique. He possesses conscious awareness and can choose--or not choose--to live in harmony with the laws of nature. Man's power does not make him independent, but rather morally responsible to observe and preserve the laws of nature.

### MAN AND EARTH

Creation is a veritable cocoon of life, which sacrifices itself in order that life—and life more abundantly—may come to be; and not only life more abundantly, but a greater and more perfected form of life. Nature has moved from energized matter to the production of biological life, and has moved from the biological level to the support of spiritualized beings. It has been noted that the earth moves, seemingly by superior guidance, towards her spiritualization. The earth grows old and her energy is being exhausted as she moves forward to her final end--spiritualization. Then creation, butterfly-like, escapes earth's dead cocoon in order to achieve its ultimate unification. The author of Hebrews writes:

*Lord, of old you established the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish but you remain; all of them will grow old like a garment. You will roll them up like a cloak, like a garment they will be changed--But you are the same, and your years will have no end.*

*Heb. 1:10-12*

Creation's final and ultimate step depends upon man. Man is the hope and despair of the world. In Christ and in "*the sons of God,*" creation finds its hope. In man--without Christ--it finds its despair. Paul writes to the Romans:

*Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. Creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but by him who once subjected it; yet not without hope, because the world itself will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Yes, we know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now.*

*Rm. 8:19-22*

Christians are often inclined to confine Christ within a small circumference. Perhaps we are content to limit Christ within a dimension that leaves us comfortable, as it also limits our Christian commitment. Often we only see Christ of the Cross, risen from the dead, as our personal Savior. The Fourth Gospel reveals the Cosmic Christ. The whole world is dependent upon Christ. He is the Savior of the World, and all the sons of God are apparently involved in this divine salvific enterprise. The author of Ephesians writes:

*God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship.* Eph. 1:9-10

We read in Colossians:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creatures. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible, and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, principalities or powers, all were created through him and for him. He is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being ... It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace (Shalom) through the blood of his cross.* Col. 1:15,16,19,20

Again, we read in Ephesians:

*He has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him thus exalted, head of the church, which is his body: the fullness of him who fills the universe in all its parts.* Eph. 1:22

We read in Second Peter:

*What we await are new heavens and a new earth where, according to his promise, the justice of God will reside. So, beloved, while waiting for this, make every effort to be found without stain or defilement and at peace (Shalom) in his sight. Consider that our Lord's patience is directed towards salvation.* 2 Pt. 3:13-14

As Paul observes:

*Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God.*  
Rm. 8:19

*When, finally, all has been subjected to the Son, he will then subject himself to the One who made all things subject to him, so that God may be all in all.*  
I Cor. 15:28

Obviously, there is a mystery of evil at work in the universe. The Book of Revelation warns: "*But woe to you, earth and sea, for the devil has come down upon you! His fury knows no limits, for he knows his time is short (Rev. 12:12).*"

Only two persons truly realize the potential power in the single human personality: Christ and Satan. Between Christ and Satan there is cosmic conflict. The souls of individual men and women are essential for victory to both Christ and Satan. People must understand the power of the human spirit. Christ labors to bring the potential power of each human being into fullness of activity, for it is a powerful means to achieve the glorious plan of God for creation. Satan likewise labors. He strives to destroy the spiritual potentiality of the human race by the destruction of human life in embryo--in its budding potential. When this is not possible, then he seeks to retard personality development. He seeks to turn the spiritual powers of the human soul in upon itself and to negate its effects in the world. However, when strong personalities who radiate spiritual power appear on earth--as did Jesus--Satan seeks to seduce these persons, and to pervert and divert their energy into destructive channels.

We see that the energy and power of every being--whether it be the energy of an atom or the spiritual power of the human soul--is intended to radiate out of itself for two purposes: one, to draw other beings within the rays of its power in order to sustain and nourish them; two, by so doing transform all elements or persons involved. On all levels of existence, this process causes sacrifice and exhaustion of the elements involved. However, the sacrifice and gift are always creative--a new form emerges. In the case of human beings, spiritual capacity increases. With this increase, there is an augmentation of its power of radiation. Its spirit becomes a more powerful force within the universe. When one comes to see human beings from this dimension, then it is understandable why certain people, who may appear

in the eyes of the world as insignificant, cause such alarm and concern for Satan that they receive his undivided attention. It is told that he once said to a parish priest (John Vianney) in Ars, France, "*seven like you could destroy my kingdom!*"

## CHRISTIAN HOLINESS

Jesus calls his disciples to come up the mountain, sit at His feet, look into His eyes, and open their hearts to receive the engrafted Word. To them, He explains the secrets of the kingdom. He came, He says, to perfect the Law and not set it aside. For the scribes, the Law summarized all wisdom--human and divine. It served as the supreme guide of conduct, and they believed its fulfillment assured divine acceptance. Most viewed the Torah as the fullness of divine revelation. Jesus could not and did not agree with the commonly accepted belief concerning the Scriptures.

Jesus warns His disciples: "*I tell you, unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 5:20).*" Jesus makes clear what He means by the holiness of the Pharisees and the surpassing holiness of the disciples. He refers to the disciples as being both the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In these colorful images two things are being emphasized. First, discipleship is primarily a matter of the spirit--of purity of heart; it concerns itself with thought and intention. And secondly, a disciple produces good and holy deeds that enrich the lives of others and give glory to God. Such deeds truly manifest God's power and presence in the world.

In order to press home the point that the internal disposition of people is important in the eyes of God, Jesus offers six examples by way of illustration. All are related to human relationships. Nothing is more essential to discipleship than the attitude, the feelings, and the behavior of a disciple towards other persons. With these six examples, Jesus demonstrates what He means by fulfilling the Law, and what He requires of His disciples in order to be the "*salt of the earth*" and the "*light of the world.*" He refers to the Law given on Mt. Sinai with "*You have heard*" or "*It was said,*" and then shifts to "*What I say to you*" or "*What I tell you...*" These statements are His instructions to His disciples. In each case, we see that Jesus brings the Law to fulfillment. However, in order to do so, He dismisses the Law in three cases as being insufficient guiding principles for Christian conduct. By so doing, Jesus operates with divine authority as a divine Lawgiver.

We know that the scribes and the Pharisees prided themselves upon external conformity to the Law. If their external behavior was in no way contradictory to the letter of the Law and its traditional interpretation, they considered themselves to be holy, religious men. Jesus chided them for this attitude. He spoke of the dish being clean on the outside but dirty on the inside. He tried to force them to look into their hearts and come to repentance--while there was still time.

We know that the civil law deals primarily with overt acts. People who transgress these laws are discernible criminals. If caught and convicted, they will suffer the penalty of their crime. Jesus speaks of this, but He goes on to say that many who appear innocent before the law and in the public eye will be found guilty in God's eyes. He points out that there is a law against murder and the public abuse of another person, but He also adds that harboring anger in the heart will not go unpunished. It is anger that breeds murder--it is of the spirit of murder. Violence has its roots in such a spirit. Also, if a person holds another human being in contempt (Jesus holds this to be a deadly spirit) he risks the fires of Gehenna.

Jesus teaches that if we are willfully out of harmony with others, we are out of harmony with God. If we have closed our hearts to others and remain unrepentant of the injury we have caused them, we will find no acceptance at the altar of God. An unreconciled brother means an unreconciled God, and no number of liturgical acts can change the fact. If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

This does imply that we are the guilty party in the dispute, however even when we are the injured party, Jesus still demands that we seek the good of those who injure us. A disciple must make reconciliation an urgent priority. Jesus teaches that in this life we are all people on their way to court--each of us truly must stand before the tribunal of divine justice. We are warned that if we have injured others we would do well to settle our accounts with them while in this life. If we do not, the Lord will settle them--not mercifully but in strict justice. He says:

*Lose no time; settle with your opponent while on your way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent may hand you over to the judge who will hand you over to the guard who will throw you*



*into prison. I warn you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.* *Mt. 5:25-26*

It is teachings such as these that supply a good foundation for the doctrine of Purgatory. Here people are not spoken of as being lost, but of being temporarily punished in the next life for unrepentant sins in this life.

Jesus turns His attention to the ever popular subject of sexual relationships. He speaks of adultery. The law dealt strongly with overt cases of adultery--the parties involved could be stoned to death. Jesus places lustful desires in the same category as adultery. *"What I say to you is: Anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts (Mt. 5:28)."* To look at a woman as an object of lust is to violate the respect due a human person.

Let us remember that this does not mean a temptation to adultery. Temptations in themselves are not sinful--they are invitations to sin. For the thought to be sinful the will must enter into the act. The sinful thought is the *"I would if I could"* attitude. Such a person does not commit the overt act because they lack the opportunity. With some harsh language and strong metaphors, Jesus emphasizes the need to avoid those things that lead one into such sins--looking and touching, for example.

Of course the words are not intended to be taken literally, however Deuteronomy 25:11-12 explicitly allows for the punishment of cutting off the hand in connection with an obscene act committed by a woman. We would probably refer to the same act today as "fighting dirty." In this text in Deuteronomy, the Lord is emphasizing that the salvation of the person at the last judgment is worth any sacrifice in this life.

With this subject still in mind, Jesus turns to the question of divorce:

*It was also said, "Whenever a man divorces his wife, he must give her a decree of divorce." What I say to you is: everyone who divorces his wife--lewd conduct is a separate case--forces her to commit adultery. The man who marries a divorced woman likewise commits adultery.* *Mt. 5:31-32*

The Lord teaches that to divorce one's wife is to place her in a position that exposes her to remarriage. The Lord refers to this as adultery, and places the guilt of the sin upon the one who causes the situation, as well as the one who takes advantage of it. There is an implied condemnation of divorce, which Matthew will deal with in Chapter Nineteen.

Jesus forbids His disciples to follow the common practice of the time of taking oaths. The law called for the taking of an oath in conjunction with a religious vow, or to testify to the truth of one's statement. Jesus was directly revoking the Old Testament commands. Such oaths implied a lack of trust and respect in the word of another. The sincerity and mutual respect that must characterize the disciples make a simple "yes" or a simple "no" a sacred expression of truth.

Jesus loosely quotes the law of retaliation, which he refutes: "*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (Mt. 5:38).*" The Torah sought to establish proportionate retaliation to avoid useless bloodshed and feuds. The law of retaliation was an ancient custom among the Semitic people. It served as a protection to the individual as it obliged the next of kin to avenge both injury and murder.

Here Jesus rejects the customary principles of self-defense and self-preservation. Evil must not be met with evil. Physical violence is to be suffered: "*offer no resistance to one who is evil. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other (Mt. 5:39).*" We find a proper interpretation of this verse in John, where Jesus replies to the soldier who gave Him "*a sharp blow on the face ... 'If I said anything wrong produce the evidence, but if I spoke the truth why hit me (Jn. 18:23)?'*" Jesus does not literally turn the other cheek. He speaks out against violence and injustice, and he teaches His disciples that violence in any form is alien to discipleship.

In five of the cases illustrated, Jesus teaches the way of discipleship with "*But what I say to you is ...*" However, in the sixth illustration there is a command:

*You have heard the commandment, "You shall love your countryman but hate your enemy. My command to you is: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors." Mt. 5: 44*

Many agree that this command "*love your enemies*" is the most unique saying of Jesus. It has no parallel in the Old Testament or in Jewish literature of the time. The fulfillment of this command demonstrates that a disciple is a child of the heavenly Father:

*This will prove that you are sons of your heavenly Father, for his sun rises on the bad and the good, he rains on the just and the unjust ... In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.* *Mt. 5:45,48*

Many look upon these precepts of Jesus as exaggerations to be rationalized away by any sensible Christian. Few realize the great enterprise in which they have been invited to share. We prefer to remain at our child's play--not realizing how deadly a game it truly is. We run across the face of the earth like pea brained, small-hearted, mean, selfish little chickens; snatching our gratifications where we find them; picking at everyone who gets in our way; the weaker and more inferior providing the better and more "pick-able" material; and we cluck proudly over every egg produced. The Lord intends for His people to soar like the eagles, yet so many are content to remain "chicken Christians."

Christ firmly teaches that hatred and all the evil fruits it produces exclude us from the kingdom of God. He confirms--in word and deed--that the power called *love* creates Christians, establishes the reign of God and ultimately brings about the redemption of the entire universe. Paul teaches that no greater power than love exists in the world; in the eyes of heaven there is no substitute for love. Only the people who live in love abide in God.

On the other hand, hatred is perverted spiritual energy. The spirit of hate destroys union and unity; it alienates, separates, and fragments. It is a power that forces away others and isolates them. It cripples the growth and development of persons and negates their powers of soul. Instead of seeking a transformation of self with others, the hateful person exerts and exalts self, deforming and destroying the object of its hate. Hate uses the same spiritual energy as does love.

Both hate and love demand sacrifice and exhaustion of self. However, because the energy of soul is not directed towards union and transformation, the hateful person fails to move into a higher dimension

of being, and fails to increase in spiritual power. Nature seems to teach that the hateful spirit, through its negative exercises, dissipates itself and lessens its being and powers of radiation. It will eventually completely exhaust itself. Hatred is truly self-destructive. Will it not come to be one day that evil will finally burn itself out and be no more? However it seems, at this point in creation, that all those whose spirits are perverted will refuel the furnace of hatred and keep the fires of destruction alive.

Hatred has the tendency to perpetuate itself. An established environment of hatred is conducive to impeding the power of love in others, and fosters overt or unconscious hatred. Even though there may be many verbal professions of love in a family, psychological research indicates that many family relationships are destructive. This may be the result of either the evil of ignorance, or an overt or subtle spirit of hatred.

Every human being is potentially a new and unique creature, capable of being something different and special in life. However, we know from our study of science that a human being is, in some degree, a product and synthesis of the past. One's immediate past is one's parents. The child is a product of two people who, in a sense, have been transformed within the child. If one parent comes to hate the other parent, this hatred may well be unconsciously directed against the parent who is also in the child. The child may experience an ambivalence of hate and love from such a parent. Can a child truly hate a parent without hating part of self? When we study the whole human situation from its genesis, we know that we are all brothers and sisters in the family of mankind. To truly hate anyone is to hate self--to hate all. To love anyone is to love self--to love all.

Many people neither love nor hate others. They are indifferent to them. They conserve their spiritual energy by turning it in upon themselves. They sacrifice their creative powers in order to maintain their status quo. They have no faith, nor belief in love; they will not take the risk to discover its powers. Like the miser, they play it safe with the gold of spiritual energy. They become like the acorn that has no belief in oaks, and conservatively nourishes the golden essence of its own being by not breaking out of the shell, and avoiding getting involved with the elements around: too dirty, too wet, too cold, too hot--too risky. In time the acorn loses what it possesses, that golden potential locked within its shell becomes dust.

People of such selfishness do cluster others around them, extending themselves into relationships with like people. They enjoy the superficial pleasures of human relationships which never make too many demands. Those relationships that are too demanding are quickly terminated. However, sometimes the cost of a superficial relationship is more than one bargained for; human relationships are not always predictable, especially when indifference turns to hatred. For some people *hatred* is their only sense of *aliveness*. As long as they hate, they can still feel themselves, and experience themselves as real.

In the end, the life of the indifferent must discover its emptiness. The self-centered come to experience acute boredom--the malady of a dying spirit. After all, the human heart is made for communion, for union, for transformation, in order to experience a renewal and a new birth: "*Our hearts were made for thee O Lord--they will not rest until they rest in thee.*" Atrophy destroys the awareness of restlessness but increases the sense of boredom. A body grows tired--a spirit grows bored.

Many indifferent people become the cold beauties of our society. Nature too--and for the same reason--produces her cold beauties. It is said that a rock is a being that becomes incurably fixed along the chain of evolution. It is characteristic of minerals to have chosen a road which closed them in prematurely upon themselves; by their innate structure, the molecules are unfit for growth. In order to develop beyond a certain size, they resort to a trick of association; the atoms are linked together--accidentally and externally--without any true combination or union. Among these retarded elements, along the chain of evolution, we find such cold beauties as the diamond, the emerald, the ruby. On the scale of evolution, the flower is greater than the diamond.

If God has turned a retarded and selfish perverted nature into diamonds, emeralds, and rubies, perhaps there is hope for us spiritual retardants. We may yet in the end--because of divine creativity and merciful love--become spiritual jewels of loveliness.

## CHAPTER 8

### RABBONI

#### INTRODUCTION

As our understanding of Christian Discipleship grows, our commitment to Christ should deepen. Paul writes in Ephesians:

*God has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan he was pleased to decree in Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time: namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship. Eph. 1:9-10*

As the fullness of the divine plan unfolds before the eyes of faith, so too unfold the depths of Christian Discipleship. Discipleship calls us to repentance, to faith in Jesus Christ, and incorporation into Jesus through Christian Baptism in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Here discipleship begins, not ends. From the preaching and expenditure of energy of certain Christian Communities and their ministers, you could get the impression that discipleship consists entirely of "*confessing with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead... (Rm. 10:9).*" However--as the author of Hebrews points out--this still leaves us in the Christian Delivery Room, within the birth and infancy narrative.

*Let us, then, go beyond the initial teaching about Christ and advance to maturity, not laying the foundation all over again: repentance from dead works, faith in God, instruction about baptisms and laying-on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we shall advance!*

*Heb. 6:1-3*

As did the Child Jesus so must the Christian infant grow in age and wisdom before God and man.

We understand that discipleship demands *mission*--evangelism. We are called to proclaim prudently to family, friends, and strangers the grace

of repentance, and sagaciously announce the Gospel--the divine plan of salvation in Jesus Christ which embraces all mankind. A disciple is a maker of disciples--bringing others to discover the joy of personal salvation in Jesus Christ. *Mission* is the result of the spontaneous overflow of the surprising joy at the discovery of hidden treasures in Christian Faith. Recently in the comic strip "*Peanuts*", one little character said to another: "*I would have made a good evangelist. You know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion.*" "*How'd you do that?*" inquired the other. "*I hit him with my lunch box!*" replied the little evangelist. This would not be an example of what we mean by "*sagaciously announce the Gospel.*"

We know that discipleship demands a personal commitment to the person of Jesus on our part and likewise, a commitment of Jesus to us. We will always be in His Presence and a part of His life. A disciple should remain consciously aware of the Presence of Christ in whose power and grace a Christian lives and acts. The eye of Jesus is upon His disciples; His healing rays penetrate their souls. The power of His love draws them ever closer to His heart. The disciple ought to rest securely under the protective power of Jesus as does a little bird under the wings of its mother. Such commitment and presence demands that a disciple be firmly with Christ. Discipleship demands such solidarity with Jesus that the disciples not only follow Jesus along the road, down into the valleys and up the mountain, but that they follow closely, not at a distance. Disciples step deliberately into the footsteps of Jesus, which implies being one in thought, intention, and action with Christ. That is Christian Solidarity.

In the beginning, Jesus enters into the boat of our lives, as in the case of Peter and Andrew. Perhaps we would like to limit discipleship to that saving moment. Having Christ fit into our lives could be a very comfortable Christianity. However, the disciples brought their boats to shore. There they left them, so that they could be in the life of Jesus Christ. Discipleship demands following in the footsteps of the Master. For every disciple, Jesus is always *Rabboni—My Teacher*. As a disciple grows enlightened through the teachings of Jesus, the entire life and mission of discipleship becomes illuminated and deepened; the light of

understanding directs love and its activities. God desires not only good intentions but righteous deeds. Good intention is the *salt* of discipleship, while good work is its *lamp*.

Once Jesus said to his disciples:

*You address me as "Teacher" and "Lord" and fittingly enough, for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet--I who am Teacher and Lord--then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do. I solemnly assure you, no slave is greater than his master; no messenger outranks the one who sent him. Once you know all these things, blest will you be if you put them into practice.*

*Jn.13:13-17*

According to John, the earthly setting for these words was the Last Supper, at which Jesus gave His farewell discourse to His disciples. Certain scholars hold that John intends for us to see the Risen and victorious Christ addressing His church from heaven. The expression, "*What I just did,*" refers to the death of Jesus, which was symbolically expressed through the washing of the disciples' feet. Jesus teaches His disciples that they must also lay down their lives as He has done. It is interesting that John relates immediately after this, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. He seemingly intends to make a correlation between this teaching and Judas' subsequent behavior. This teaching brought Judas to the crossroads of discipleship. At this point, the disciple Judas dropped out of the school of discipleship and became *possessed*. "*Immediately after, Satan entered his heart (Jn. 13:27).*" The disciple and apostle became the traitor.

This particular aspect of discipleship is well clarified in the other gospel accounts. We read in Matthew: "*He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me (Mt. 10:38).*" Jesus then said to his disciples: "*If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps (Mt. 16:24).*" Luke quotes Jesus as saying: "*Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple (Lk. 14:27).*" Jesus explains that it is only by so doing that the edifice of discipleship rises upon the foundation of discipleship. Immediately following the above statement, Jesus says:



*If one of you decides to build a tower, will he not first sit down and calculate the outlay to see if he has enough money to complete the project? He will do that for fear of laying the foundation and then not being able to complete the work; for all who saw it would jeer at him, saying, "That man began to build what he could not finish."* Lk. 14:28-30

Jesus implies that "taking up the cross" is the daily sacrifice of self demanded by discipleship: "Deny his very self." He goes on to teach:

*He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin, whereas he who brings himself to naught for me discovers who he is.* Mt. 10:39

*Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* Mt. 16:25

Jesus clarifies what is meant by "deny his very self":

*If anyone comes to me without turning his back on his father and mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters, indeed his very self, he cannot be my follower.* Lk.14:26-27

Seemingly the words of Jesus imply that all those relatives equal oneself, that they are an extension of one's own personal life. We find a good interpretation of the phrase "turning his back" in the following text: "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me (Mt. 10:37)."

Luke states clearly the price of discipleship when he quotes Jesus as saying: "In the same way, none of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his possessions (Lk. 14:33)." Jesus demands radical detachment from things, people, and self. Is the price of discipleship too high? How much is Christian Discipleship worth? A price is too high only when one pays more for a thing than one receives. The price of discipleship is not too high, but it is a price many are unwilling to pay. The words of Jesus make clear what the results will be, both for accepting discipleship and for rejecting it:

*Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* Mt. 16:25

*He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin (Judas is a case in point), whereas he who brings himself to naught for me discovers who he is.* Mt. 10:39

Let us recall the analogy of the acorn. The acorn discovers itself, not by turning in upon itself and contemplating its inner life, but only when it takes the risk of becoming an oak. When the acorn becomes the oak, then it knows and understands self--it discovers what it is. One Rabbi taught his students: "*Acorns are always sad. Only oaks are truly happy!*" Jesus teaches that the escape from sadness of an acorn into the happiness of an oak is, paradoxically, through death of self--"*for Me,*" "*for My sake.*"

Jesus asks would-be disciples to reflect upon these questions: "*What profit would a man show if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process? What can a man offer in exchange for his very self (Mt. 16:26)?*"

Discipleship involves one personally in the life and mission of Jesus. The Scriptures have given us some scope of that mission--"*namely, to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship (Eph. 1:10);*" "*It pleased God ... by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens (Col. 1:19-20);*" "*... so that God may be all in all (I Cor. 15:28).*" Through baptism, a disciple becomes an integral part of the Body of Christ. As the person becomes more docile and submissive to the Spirit of Christ (this involves dying to self for His sake) the powers of the human soul grow through these exercises of love. Spiritual energy--in the form of increased love--manifests itself more powerfully within the human spirit. Because of the intimate relationship with Christ, the disciple truly augments and increases the power of Christ's body in the universe. The disciple in Christ is a principle of unification, a maker of peace, and a powerful force in the spiritual transformation of other persons. When love defines the personality of the disciple, the disciple's life has been saved and he "*discovers who he is.*"

Moses could place only two choices before Israel:

*I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you ...* Dt. 30:19-20

When it is all said and done, we, too, only have two choices set before us: We are for Christ or we are against Christ. It is either Christ or the Antichrist. *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters (Lk. 11:23)."* The Scriptures imply that to reject Christ is to reject Divine Love and Life. Certainly, this is not always consciously evident to us. It takes time to evaluate the full story of a human life. It is often the dry wood of old age that reveals how fundamentally evil were so many choices made in the green years of life: *"He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin."* Many who reject Christ--and particularly the spirit of Christ--become the *scatters* of the world and the destroyers of shalom; they become lethal spirits bringing death to others and to themselves. People who make the choice to live lives of self-pursuits with unholy indifference to others become, in the words of Father Judge, the slag in the furnace. Slag absorbs the heat and energy of the coals and gives forth no energy, nor heat of its own. There are people who become like octopi in this life: they have eight arms to receive and not one to give. Sooner or later they create their own hell.

When a wise person views the alternatives, the reconfirmation of one's Christian Discipleship is the only *wise* course of action. Prudence directs that if we have become some kind of drop-out, we should speedily re-enroll in the School of the Master--despite the entrance exam--and, this time, major in Divine Love and Universal Salvation and persevere until we become the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." *"A student is not above his teacher; but every student when he has finished his studies will be on a par with his teacher (Lk. 6:40)."* Jesus said to his disciples:

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love ... This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I*

*command you ... I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you to go forth and bear fruit.*

*Jn. 15:9-16*

What would it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose the friendship of Christ?

## KNOWLEDGE AND SALVATION

Jesus once revealed to St. Teresa of Avila: "*All the ills of the world befall it from not clearly understanding the truths of the Scripture ....*" Jesus went on to say: "*Do you know what truly loving me means? It means understanding that everything that displeases me is a lie.*" These thoughts re-emphasize the important relationship between salvation and knowledge. Many ills befall us because we do not know the truth--we do not clearly understand the truths of the Scriptures. Let us recall the words of the evangelist John, in which he stressed the important relationship between knowledge and love. Speaking of agape--Christian love--John wrote:

*This love is based on the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever. In truth and love, then, we shall have grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ the Father's Son. It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the path of truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. But now ... I would make this request of you ... let us love one another ... Look out that you yourself do not lose what you have worked for; you must receive your reward in full. Anyone who is so "progressive" that he does not remain rooted in the teaching of Christ does not possess God, while anyone who remains rooted in the teaching possesses both the Father and the Son.*

*2 Jn. 1:2-5,8-9*

Without the light of divine revelation, we cannot know the truth about our human nature and its destiny; we cannot discover the path to life. If we are mistaken about ourselves and our final goal, ill will certainly befall us. Good intentions alone cannot save us. We may intend to cure our ills by taking medicine but mistakenly take poison; our good intention will not alter the evil of our mistake.

How we understand our human nature will, to some degree, direct our human behavior. If we have been *progressive* and modern enough to discover our answer about mankind in Darwin's catechism, we will see ourselves as refined animals in an environment in which the fittest survive. We will move through life in a dog eat dog environment, seeking our physical satisfaction with little regard for the needs and rights of other human beings. Survival is the name of the game. If we have even been so *progressive* as to find our answers in Freud's catechism, we will be inclined to see man more as a social animal in which relationships with other humanoids are important. Jesus remarked: "*And if your light is darkness, how deep will the darkness be (Mt. 6:23)!*"

The evangelist John teaches us that we must be rooted in the teachings of Christ if we are to possess God. A disciple has a moral obligation to become *rooted* in Christ. It is the essence of discipleship. Even when we were little children, becoming indoctrinated into the catechism of Christ, the Church did not leave us in doubt about the fundamental truths of human nature. Vital questions were asked and truthfully answered on the *very* first pages: What is man? A creature composed of body and soul--made to the image and likeness of God. Who made me? God made me. Why did God make me? To know Him, to love Him, to serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him in the next life. As children we were given the truth that properly oriented us towards ourselves and our lives on earth. We understand human nature to be both physical and spiritual. Because we are spiritual by nature, we possess the power to know, understand, and reason; we possess the power to make choices--we have freedom of will. For our behavior to be classified as a human act, it must be performed both knowingly and willingly. We act humanly when we know what we are doing and we freely will to do it. Only such acts constitute moral responsibility, and can be morally good or evil. Knowing and willing are the essence of human behavior.

As for the power of the human will--we need to understand that the spirit releases the energy and the power to act only when the human will, enlightened by the mind, makes a deliberate choice. If the will remains in limbo--remains undecided--no power to perform will be released. People who live in constant doubt and indecision become chronically listless, with little energy for anything else. Why is it that some people have so much energy and get so much done? Precisely because they are willful people. They make willful decisions. The energetic spirits are the "*I wills*" of life,

not the “*maybes*” or “*perhaps*” of life. It has often been observed that no decision can be the worst decision. Making no decision removes an element of self-control from ones life, and leaves it to chance circumstance, or to the will of others.

## CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES

Matthew presents the essential teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Here a disciple discovers the working principles of Christian life; there is an obligation to be rooted in them. It is important that we grasp and understand the principles of Christian behavior and not get lost in the illustrations. Unless we grasp these principles, we can never act with religious maturity, with certitude and serenity. It is exasperating to a good teacher to have students constantly ask him for the solution to problems when he has taught them the principles by which they can find the solution themselves.

The Church teaches us that we may not make a moral decision while in a state of doubt. We must reasonably resolve the doubt before we act. For example: A man hears a noise downstairs in the deep of the night. It could be either a burglar, or his son sneaking in late. He goes down the steps with a gun. Morally speaking, the shooting of the gun can never be a justifiable act of protection and self-defense until he is certain that it is a burglar and not his son.

However, here we speak of those who have been taught the principles of morality, and refuse to apply them out of laziness or cowardice. People often manipulate teachers, ministers, and directors in order to avoid moral responsibility for their own behavior. Such behavior retards their moral development. They displease God by their refusal to mature and become responsible members within the Church. We need to learn to live with a degree of uncertainty and fear, and to trust in the Merciful Love of God.

Matthew presents the Christian Doctrine in a context in which it is contrasted with the religious philosophy of the Pharisees and the scribes of their party. Luke presents the same Doctrine without any such references; his audience of Gentiles would have had little interest in Jewish Law. Matthew's method enables him to highlight the truth that the human spirit is the true source of moral good and moral evil. The Scripture says: “*A good man*

*produces good from the good in his heart; an evil man produces evil out of his store of evil (Lk. 6:45)."*

The Pharisees and the scribes were religious people, and they intended to accomplish the Will of God. They determined that the written Scriptures expressed this Will. They deduced that by the strict external observance of the laws of God they fulfilled the will of God. Therefore they were holy and religious people, worthy to enter into liturgical union with God. They remained pure and uncontaminated--they remained *separated* from sinful persons, places, and things.

Jesus teaches that the Pharisees and scribes have not gone deep enough. God desires not only a liturgical union in which mankind properly worships Him, but more importantly, He desires a personal union with mankind, a union that is essentially spiritual. God is Spirit. Jesus moves the focus of true religious conviction from external behavior to internal disposition; true religion is essentially a matter of heart. This does not imply that good works and deeds are not essential to true religion. However, the emphasis is upon the heart; it is the motivation of the heart that makes an act objectively religious and acceptable to God, or determines an act to be hypocritical and unacceptable to God.

We noted previously that the foundation of Christian life is an internal spiritual condition called *poverty of spirit* or *humility*. Humility establishes a spiritual environment in which the human personality is completely dependent and open to the presence and power of God's spirit. Under such a spirit, the human heart longs for the reign of God and suffers when it is delayed, impeded or rejected by the world. Such a spirit actively labors for the reign of God and causes it to be.

The six illustrations presented by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, the concern of Jesus over interpersonal relationships and the quality of those relationships is clearly expressed. The six illustrations follow directly the warning of Jesus: "*I tell you (the disciples), unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of God.*" They conclude with Jesus saying: "*In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Obviously, a disciple is being "*made perfect*" by daily dying to self in order to fulfill the commandment of love. We come to understand that whatever is not of love--in ourselves

or others--is something other than Christian. "Do you know what truly loving me means? It means understanding that everything that displeases me is a lie."

## REWARDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Matthew understands human nature too well to underestimate the rewards of discipleship. However, the rewards of discipleship depend upon the motivation of the heart. In Matthew's time, three important external works of religion were giving alms to the poor, praying, and fasting. We have noted that the Pharisees implied that the disciples of Jesus were not religious, for they neglected prayer and fasting:

*John's disciples fast frequently and offer prayers; the disciples of the Pharisees do the same. Yours, on the contrary, eat and drink freely.*

*Lk. 5:33*

It is Jesus' intention that His disciples do not give alms, pray and fast, as do the disciples of the Pharisees.

In our time, Freudian psychologists have had a field-day stripping away the pious illusions of many do-gooders and revealing their naked selfishness. They brought to light the hidden motives for the social justice works of many sociologists. They discovered the hidden guilt which sought to compensate and find release through social works. They discovered the hidden pride which expressed itself in a messianic complex or fed its sense of superiority on the "bending down" to assist the "lowly" and "less fortunate." They have rightly pointed out how many overt acts of religion and virtue have selfish gratification and self-aggrandizement at their source.

Long before the Freudians came along, Jesus warned His disciples that if selfishness motivated their religious acts, self would have to find its own reward. When religious acts are accomplished for self-gratification or to gain the esteem of others, there will be no heavenly reward. If we work for the esteem of people--the esteem of people will be the reward. Jesus is not against our good works being seen--"Let your light shine!"--but He is against them being done merely to be seen by others. He says: "Be on guard against performing religious acts for people to see. Otherwise expect no recompense from your heavenly Father (Mt. 6:1)." Jesus calls people who do religious deeds for selfish motives "hypocrites." They give their alms to the



poor amidst great public display. He refers, ironically, to the blowing of a trumpet before dropping their alms into the collection box or distributing them to the poor. Jesus implies that if everyone saw it or heard of it, it will be reward enough. As we know, Herod built a gorgeous temple at Jerusalem; few ever believed that it was for the glory of God.

Certain times of day--as with Islam today--Israel was called to prayer, especially at the offering of the morning and evening sacrifice in the temple. Our Lord said there were those who made sure that at times of prayer they would find themselves standing in public places so there would be no doubt as to their sanctity. The Lord said they had public sanctity and that was it.

There was a relatively young widow in a small southern parish, where a relatively handsome pastor was stationed. The relatively young widow lamented piously to the relatively pious pastor of her spiritual disconsolation of being deprived of daily mass. It seemed she must be at the factory at 6 a.m. and daily mass was at 7 a.m. The time of daily mass was moved to 5:30 a.m. to fulfill her spiritual needs. After she remarried, she did not even bother to attend Sunday mass at 11 a.m.

The law required that the Jews fast one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. In the time of Jesus, it was customary for pious Jews to fast three times weekly. It was done as reparation for the sins of the people. A fast was considered a prolonged prayer, for it expressed a hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. During such a fast, no food or drink was taken from sundown of one evening until the following evening at sundown. In the days of summer heat, such fasting from water could be quite heroic. Jesus observed that many desired that their heroism be noted. They walked the streets like sad-faced flowers out of water and, indeed, all within the household knew when father fasted--even the cat moved with caution. A young man once commented to his father that he knew when he fasted because he returned from work with his hair disheveled and, properly, with a face to match. Jesus observed that such religious heroism was well noted by others and the noting of it was reward enough: *"I assure you, they are already repaid (Mt. 6:16)."*

All these acts receive their true nature from their motivation. On the surface they appear to be religious acts--deeds done for the honor and glory of God--but they are secretly done for selfish motives even, at

times, unconsciously so. Jesus taught that such motivation turns these deeds into hypocritical acts unacceptable to God.

With the following three examples, the disciples received the principles to guide all their religious acts:

*When you give alms ... you are not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Keep your deeds of mercy secret and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. Mt. 6:2-4*

*Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees what no man sees, will repay you. Mt. 6:6*

*When you fast, see to it that you groom your hair and wash your face. In that way no one can see you are fasting but your Father who sees what is hidden; and your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you. Mt. 6:17-18*

*What is always secret and hidden are the motives of the human heart. However, God sees what is hidden and secret. Paul teaches: "God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Christ Jesus." Rm. 2:16*

## CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Matthew enumerates three acts of religion and he places prayer between alms giving and fasting. Prayer is at the heart of religious acts; it is to the spirit as air is to the body. Prayer is the breath of the spirit, the sign and measure of its supernatural life. In prayer, a divine environment of interpersonal communication between God and the human spirit is created. The spirit that ceases to pray creates a spiritual vacuum in which supernatural life will soon crumble. Teresa of Avila wrote: "*There is only one way to find God and that is by prayer.*" Augustine taught that "*prayer is the key of heaven.*" Jesus is our Perfect Teacher and He taught in word and deed. Prayer permeated the life of Jesus. In the one scene from boyhood, He went with His parents to the temple to pray. His public life began with His baptism at which time we are told he was at prayer and the Holy Spirit came upon Him. He prepared for His ministry by praying in the desert for forty days and forty nights. The night before He chose His Apostles, Luke

says: "Then he went out to the mountain to pray, spending the night in communion with God (Lk. 6:12)." He gave a constant example of prayer to His Apostles. After the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, we read, "One day when Jesus was praying in seclusion and his disciples were with him ... (Lk. 9:18)." Again we read that He took Peter, John and James, "and went up onto a mountain to pray. While he was praying, his face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzlingly white (Lk. 9:28-29)." He once told Peter that He prayed especially for him. He prayed for unity of faith among His disciples. At the grave of Lazarus, at the Last Supper, in the Garden of Olives--He prayed. On the cross--He prayed; the last words uttered were a prayer: "'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' After he said this, he expired (Lk. 23:46)." He, who was without sin, left a powerful example to sinners of the need for prayer--always.

*Jesus admonished and encouraged the disciples to pray. "Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For the one who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. The one who knocks, enters. Would one of you hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf, or a poisonous snake when he asks for a fish?"*

*Mt. 7:7-10*

All three of these imperatives are in the active tense, which signify a continuous and on-going action of asking, seeking, and knocking. The disciples are encouraged to pray with urgency and assurance. Their confidence is to rest upon their being children of the heavenly Father. Even natural fathers who are sinful and selfish still delight in giving good things to their children. The images used by Jesus were inspired by the fact that a particular fish in the area--the *barbut*--resembled a snake, and a small loaf of bread resembled a stone. Jesus continued:

*If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks him!*

*Mt. 7:11*

*I give you my word, if you are ready to believe that you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer; it shall be done for you.*

*Mk. 11:24*

Jesus gives this good reason to pray: "Pray constantly for the strength to escape whatever is in prospect, and to stand secure before the Son of Man (Lk.

21:36).” There was a sick woman once, whom no one could help. One day she saw Jesus, and said within herself:

*“If I but touch the hem of his garment, I will be saved.” Jesus then said: “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone forth from me.”* Lk. 8:46

A disciple is never the same after reaching out in prayer to touch Jesus.

After all these examples and teaching, the disciples finally got around to asking Jesus to teach them to pray. We read in Luke:

*One day he was praying in a certain place. When he had finished one of his disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”* Lk. 11:1

Ask and you shall receive. Our Lord taught them the “*Our Father*”. Matthew inserts the Lord’s Prayer, the supreme example of Christian prayer, into the Sermon on the Mount. Luke’s version is shorter. It is delivered in a context of prayer.

Matthew presents it as a teaching on prayer. Many scholars believe that Luke presents the most primitive version of the prayer while Matthew, who conserves its essential elements, extends it in order to clarify and illuminate the essential petitions of the prayer. In Matthew, it is presented as the perfect prayer of seven petitions. It is certainly a perfect pattern in which to direct our prayers of petitions.

Matthew begins with OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN, whereas Luke simply begins the prayer with “*Father.*” Jesus alone says, “*My Father.*” The disciples pray “*Our Father,*” and this expresses the Christian Community and its unity. We are a community in Jesus--a unique family of brothers and sisters possessing a unique relationship with God. To us, God is “*Our Father.*” This relationship results from our being in the Body of Christ--the Church. A child’s home is with his Father. We are all pilgrims here on earth. Our home is with “*Our Father in heaven.*” Jesus says: “*I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God (Jn. 20:17).*” He promised to prepare a place for us and that He would come again and take us there.

**HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME:** The first petition is that the holy name of God be praised. Man exists for God and not God for man. We were created for his glory, and in our first petition we seek it. The name of God represents the Person of God. We seek that the Person of God will be loved, honored and respected by all mankind.

**YOUR KINGDOM COME:** In our second petition, we pray for the means by which God's name will be hallowed upon earth. We pray that the reign of God over men will come to be. The reign of God must be freely accepted to come upon earth.

**YOUR WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN:** This is the means by which the kingdom comes. There is no other means by which God can rule over men other than if His Will is obeyed by them. *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."* Our lives are a bit of earth over which we rule--we alone can bring His kingdom to be in that earth that is you and I.

**GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD:** Life cannot exist without nourishment. Bread is the common substance of life. Both the life of the soul and the life of the body need daily nourishment. We have a life and a position to maintain on this earth, and many material blessings are needed. Jesus says, *"Your heavenly Father knows all that you need. (Mt. 6:32)."* We have a promise that all our needs will be met if we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness--and if we pray for them. Christ teaches us to ask for our *"daily"* bread, not for a year's supply. God's gift meets the need. God's grace meets the day's need.

**AND FORGIVE US THE WRONG WE HAVE DONE:** None of us are without sin. John calls that man a liar who proclaims to be sinless. Here we ask God to deliver us from the eternal punishment due for our sins. This is no small request!

**AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO WRONG US:** This is an indispensable condition for the forgiveness of our sins. What offense have we endured that can compare to the offense of our sins? If there is just one soul over whom we fail to extend our personal absolution, we place our soul in great danger. No one or no thing is worth the loss of God's merciful forgiveness.

**SUBJECT US NOT TO TRIAL:** Here we petition God to pity our human weakness and to spare us the terrible sufferings and trials that are to come upon the world in the last days.

**BUT DELIVER US FROM THE EVIL ONE:** Here our prayer is directed toward our final end and we pray for our eternal salvation; we ask to be delivered by God, our Savior, from the ultimate power of sin, death, and Satan.

### A ROCK FOUNDATION

As the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount draw to a close, we are reminded of our commission to love others. We are not told to psychoanalyze others, but to love them. Jesus advises:

*If you want to avoid judgment, stop passing judgment. Your verdict on others will be the verdict passed on you. The measure with which you measure will be used to measure you. Mt. 7:1-3*

We have previously been taught that the essential and primary work of judgment is to declare righteousness and, only secondarily, guilt and condemnation. When we condemn others we are subtly proclaiming our own righteousness that truly, in the eyes of God, makes us hypocrites. Certainly just judgment rests with God. People will be rewarded or punished according to whether their deeds were good or evil. Certain deeds are objectively right or wrong. However, we cannot judge the moral goodness nor evilness of a person by their external acts. Knowledge and intention have to be taken into consideration. We see the deed but not the motive. We may say: "*O how good she is.*" The Lord may say: "*O how hypocritical she is.*"

As Christians, we are certainly expected and obliged to make value judgments upon human conduct--ours and others. We may even be obliged to give external correction. We must, however, keep in mind that there is a difference between reproof and correcting another person, and condemning them. Condemnation is a moral judgment; it is often followed by rejection and contempt. We are really out of order when we do condemn others, and since we cannot read the hearts of others, our judgment is rash--sinful.

The Lord suggests that if we were more consciously aware of the evil within our own hearts--the selfishness of our own motivations and our own personal hypocrisy--we would be so overwhelmed with repentance and the need for God's merciful love that everyone else would look good by comparison. At least we would experience sympathy and understanding for the weakness of other human beings. Jesus does not deliver certain people from particular sins because it is only through these sins that they remain humble to any degree. If we judge others, we write our own judgment. Jesus' advice is: Let he who is without sin hurl the first stone. You can tell the hypocrites by the stones they are throwing.

Jesus suggests that we be at least partly guided in our dealing with others by the golden rule that even guided pagans as far back as Herodotus in the 5th century B.C.: "*Treat others the way you would have them treat you: this sums up the law and the prophets (Mt. 7:12).*" We note that it may sum up the law and the prophets, but that it does not sum up the law and spirit of Christianity. The spirit of Christ demands much more. We find our Golden Rule recorded in John 15:12: "*This my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.*" This is the rule that narrows the gate to life, and leaves wide the path to destruction. Reflecting upon his doctrine, Jesus advises his disciples:

*Enter through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to damnation is wide, and the road is clear, and many choose to travel it. But how narrow is the gate that leads to life, how rough the road, and how few they are who find it!*

*Mt. 7:13-14*

Jesus teaches His doctrine to the Apostles, but not to the crowd. It is given to the Apostles to know the secrets of the kingdom. Jesus is discriminating in whom He teaches and in what He teaches. Even concerning the Apostles, He says: "*I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now (Jn. 16:12).*" He gives a strong metaphor by which He intends to stress the importance of being prudent in teaching Christian Doctrine: "*Do not give what is holy to dogs or toss your pearls before swine. They will trample them under foot, at best, and perhaps even tear you to shreds (Mt. 7:6).*" The Jews often referred to pagans as dogs and pigs. When we are faced with unrepentant and unevangelized people, there is little hope of their understanding or appreciating Christian Truth. We should be cautious about sharing certain religious truths with them. If they lack the grace to accept them, we may

make their state worse. The Didache, a Christian work appearing around the end of the first century, used this very expression in Matthew to prohibit giving the Holy Eucharist to the unbaptized or the unrepentant sinners.

For the disciples, Jesus is always *Rabboni—My Teacher*; and a disciple cannot have two teachers. How well Jesus knew that others would come in His name and seek to replace Him and His doctrine. He warns His disciples: “*Be on your guard against false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but underneath are wolves on the prowl (Mt. 7:15).*” Such prophets and false teachers seek to destroy faith in Jesus and commitment to His doctrine. As Paul preached at Miletus:

*I know that when I am gone, savage wolves will come among you who will not spare the flock. From your own number, men will present themselves distorting the truth and leading astray any who follow them. Be on guard, therefore ...* Acts 20:29-31

We are told that we will know them by their deeds--not their words and promises.

*Do you ever pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from prickly plants? Never! Any sound tree bears good fruit, while a decayed tree bears bad fruit. A sound tree cannot bear bad fruit any more than a decayed tree can bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. You can tell a tree by its fruits.* Mt. 7:16-20

The danger is real enough, and reason enough, to be grounded in the doctrine of Jesus. Jesus is the Teacher of Holiness. If we do not know His teachings we will be unable to distinguish the sheep from the wolves, the truth from the lie, and the wheat from the weeds.

It is one thing to know truth. It is another thing to live truth. If a disciple has been enlightened and yet fails to live the life of discipleship by rejecting the command to love others as Jesus teaches, He warns of serious spiritual consequences for the believer. We can be a member of the Church, involved in Christian Ministry, and in the end be condemned and rejected by Christ because our Christianity was truly a facade--a social cover. Jesus emphasizes that his teachings reveal the Way to Eternal Life. He



warns His disciples that these teachings must not only be known and understood, but also put into practice. This "*confessing in the heart*" is the concrete expression of God's Will in one's daily life. A disciple is expected to become the Word expressed in flesh. Jesus speaks of the final judgment:

*None of those who cry out, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. When that day comes, many will plead with me, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? Have we not exorcised demons by its power? Did we not do many miracles in your name as well?" Then I will declare to them solemnly, "I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!"* Mt. 7:21-23

However, there is the other side of the coin. When the disciple does hear and puts into practice the command of love, he experiences salvation. The daily demands of Christian Love call forth the highest faculties of the human soul. In the constant daily exercise of spiritual power demanded by love, human personalities grow and come to maturity in Christ. When a life is rooted in the doctrine of Christ--draws its nourishment, strength, and direction from His teachings--such a life is firmly established and constructed. It will endure whatever comes and be victorious. We Christians must realize that it is not as important that others love us, or return our love, as it is that we love others. No gift of love is ever lost. Through our life of love we give to ourselves what no one else can give us: Christian growth and development. We become our true selves and discover our name in God. The Sermon on the Mount concludes with these words:

*Anyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who builds his house on rock. When the rainy season set in, the torrents came and the winds blew and buffeted his house. It did not collapse; it had been solidly set on rock. Anyone who hears my words but does not put them into practice is like the foolish man who built his house on sandy ground. The rains fell, the torrents came, and the winds blew and lashed against his house. It collapsed under all this and was completely ruined.* Mt. 7:24-27

It was said that Jesus left the crowds spellbound by His teachings because "*he taught with authority and not like their scribes (Mt. 7:29).*" However, spells have a way of wearing away...

## CHAPTER 9

### IN THE FIELD WITH JESUS

#### INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Matthew gave us this brief summation of Jesus' work in Galilee:

*Jesus toured all of Galilee. He taught in their synagogues, proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, and cured the people of every disease and illness. As a consequence of this, his reputation traveled the length of Syria. They carried to him all those afflicted with various diseases and racked with pain: the possessed, the lunatics, and the paralyzed. He cured them all. The great crowds that followed him came from Galilee, the Ten Cities, Jerusalem and Judea, and from across the Jordan.*

*Mt. 4:23-25*

Jesus "*proclaimed the good news of the kingdom*" in both word and deed. The reign of God had come in Jesus, and people experienced the power of the heavenly kingdom that healed their sick bodies, minds, and spirits. As a result of this ministry, we saw great crowds coming to Jesus. Matthew went on to relate:

*When he saw the crowds he went up on the mountainside. After he had sat down his disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them ...*

*Mt. 5:1*

Jesus teaches His disciples the spirit of Christian Discipleship. He highlights the essential elements of its spirit. He stresses how vital the understanding and the practice of these teachings are to one's personal salvation. He talks of the disciple who gains knowledge--perhaps even becomes a real theologian--but does not make these teachings a part of his own personality by practicing them daily. Jesus compares such a disciple to the man who builds his house upon sand. The construction may be lovely and the edifice impressive, but it lacks a solid foundation.

As long as the sun continues shining and the winds remain breezes, all is fine. However, weather is not constant and climatic conditions change suddenly. Breezes may suddenly become howling winds and the sun may disappear behind darkened clouds, bringing torrential rains. It is not an unusual sight in Southern California to see expensive and beautiful homes sliding down hills and crashing into highways far below. Such homes lacked solid foundations, which became evident when the heavy and continuous rains fell. Jesus says it is like that with disciples who only hear but fail to practice His teachings; they may appear to be good, committed Christians, but the trials and temptations of life reveal reality. They neither invested their hearts in Jesus nor became "*rooted in the teachings of Christ.*" The person who fails to walk in the spirit of Christ is not truly committed to Christ. When Paul penned his powerful words to the Corinthian Community, he expressed the same inspired truth:

*If I have the gift of prophecy and, with full knowledge, comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give everything I have to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.* *I Cor. 13:2-3*

Both Jesus and Paul speak to believers called "*Christians,*" men and women of faith who are in the right Religion but have the wrong spirit. They possess knowledge and faith, but not love. They are like the Church in Ephesus: "*I hold this against you, though: you have turned aside from your early love (Rev. 2:3).*" When the day of final judgment comes, Jesus warns: "*Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers' (Mt. 7:23)!*" "*Evildoers*" are not only people who commit overt acts of evil, but also people who, for selfish reasons, refuse or neglect to do good--the good they ought to do. To do good requires a positive act; but evil is negative--a lack of doing good. To do nothing can certainly be morally evil--it can be the most evil of acts. Many Christians are truly doers of evil because they do so little good. It is better to destroy our illusion about "*evildoers*" than risk, on some awful eternal day, hearing from the lips of Jesus: "*I never knew you. Out of my sight you evildoers!*"

Jesus Christ is the Teacher of Truth. He insists that this Truth must be known and lived. He stresses, in the beatitudes, the blessed consequences

for those who hear and put His teachings into practice. He reveals the bitter consequences of failing to do so. In this way, Jesus teaches how the role of discipleship is vital, and how tragic the consequences for all involved when disciples fail to fulfill their vocation.

A vital relationship exists between the mission of Jesus to proclaim the good news to the great crowds which followed Him, and the calling of the disciples up the mountain. Matthew informs us that when Jesus saw the great crowds, He called His disciples up the mountain and there, on the mountainside, He instructed them as Yahweh had instructed Moses.

This calls for an Old Testament flashback: When Jethro--the father-in-law of Moses--saw the great burden that leadership put upon Moses, he advised him to prudently fulfill his vocation. He encouraged him to choose carefully from among the Israelites, good and trustworthy men to assist him in his task of governing this great body of people: "*The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone (Ex. 18:17).*" The Scriptures confirm this to be inspired advice when, in response to Moses' complaint to Yahweh, "*I cannot carry all this people by myself, for they are too heavy for me,*" the Lord responded:

*Assemble for me seventy of the elders of Israel, men you know for true elders and authorities among the people, and bring them to the meeting tent. When they are in place beside you, I will come down and speak with you there. I will also take some of the spirit that is on you and will bestow it on them, that they may share the burden of the people with you. You will then not have to bear it by yourself.*

*Num. 11:14,16-17*

This same prudent spirit guided Jesus. He realized that, humanly speaking, it would be impossible for Him to proclaim the good news to "*the great crowd*" alone. Prudence is seeing the goal before oneself and choosing the proper means to reach it. Jesus was speaking of the virtue of prudence when He spoke of the men who desired to build a tower or wage a campaign of war, but they first sat down to calculate whether they had the funds or forces enough to complete their projects. Calling the disciples up the mountain was an act of prudence on the part of Jesus. There was no turning of His back upon the crowd, no rejection. Jesus prudently chooses the best means available to Him to fulfill His saving mission. By making some of the people His disciples, He multiplies

Himself. Through this means He could continue His mission on earth when His own allotted time on earth ended. His work and mission had to continue in time, within the human situation, and in an incarnational way. How well Paul understood this and expressed it to the Christian Community:

*You, then, are the body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it.*  
*I Cor. 12:27*

*It is he who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ, till we become one in faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, and form that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature.*  
*Eph. 4:11-13*

However, we must bear in mind that the salvation of mankind could only be achieved by God's salvific act, which consisted of God's sending His only Son, who became the Word made Flesh. God--in Christ--entered humanity. Only humanity in God can cause redemption. For another human being--other than the person of Jesus Christ--to be an instrument of salvation in this world, one must be "*in Christ*"--incorporated into Christ to such a degree that it may be said that Jesus Christ lives and operates in and through that person. This is a definition of Christian Discipleship.

The purpose of discipleship, however, is to proclaim the good news to the great crowd. This is not as simple as it may first appear to be. It is not solely a matter of preaching in "*their synagogues*" and healing the afflicted people. There is a hidden agenda. For this reason, discipleship demands a certain quality of person for the ministry--a real Christ-person. There is, in the world, a hidden opposition to evangelism--much power and energy is expended to oppose the reign of God in the hearts of people. Jesus knows that His disciples must first be enlightened in order to understand the work to be done, the forces which oppose it, and the power needed to overcome the opposition and accomplish this work.

It is one thing to teach the theory of a science. It is another thing to put that theory into practice. We seldom fully understand the problems involved in bringing a good plan or idea into reality. We learn the theory; we do not experience the obstacles that come with putting it into

practice. Experience can be the best teacher. It is "in the field" that we discover those built-in and external oppositions before we can bring a project to its successful conclusion. The mastering of a science must be twofold: There is the classroom in which a student learns theory, and there is the field experience--or the internship--in which the student learns the difference between theory and practice. It is in practice that the person experiences self within the chosen vocation. Out there in the field, the person often has second thoughts about his or her chosen vocation. The theory of the classroom is open to fantasy and illusion which reality cannot sustain. How many put their hand to the plow and a quarter of the way down-field, turn and look back? Jesus says:

*Whoever puts his hand to the plow but keeps looking back is  
unfit for the reign of God.* *Lk. 9:62*

### FIELD EXPERIENCE

Jesus takes His disciples up the mountain and holds class on the mountainside. There He explains the theory of discipleship--what is involved and its end results. When class is over, Jesus brings the disciples down the mountain and back into the great crowd for their field-experience.

Now they will learn from their Master in action: from His instructions and responses to other people, from what He does for them, from how He handles personal situations--those trials and temptations in which he will be involved because of the ministry. The disciples will discover that the success of the mission depends not only on what is said and done but, even more, on what one is and what one becomes within the ministry. Even for the disciple there is a hidden agenda of success and failure. What a person becomes through the experience of discipleship becomes a powerful force for the success or failure of one's mission. If in the process a disciple loses the spirit of discipleship, he becomes like the salt which lost its savor--its ability to season. Jesus asks the question: "*How can you restore its flavor?*" To which he adds: "*Then it is-good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot (Mt. 5:13).*" "*It is fit for neither the soil nor the manure heap; it has to be thrown away (Lk. 14:35).*"

Before we accompany Jesus and His first disciples in their field-experience, as presented by Matthew, let us first reiterate certain important teachings and principles of discipleship. The Sermon on the Mount precisely teaches that "*the reign of God*" belongs to "*the poor in spirit*"

and to those who are "*persecuted for holiness sake.*" In other words, God rules in the lives of those called the *anawim*, and in those *anawim* who persevere in accomplishing God's Will despite persecutions in this world. Jesus explains the holiness within which a disciple must persevere in order to remain in God's reign. No earthly standard--be it secular or religious--can measure the holiness of discipleship. There is one standard of holiness for all Christian Disciples; it is the same for each. Nevertheless, this standard has infinite possibilities. Plainly speaking, Jesus says: "*In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48).*" Jesus centered upon one aspect of divine perfection, that is, the unconditional love of the Father for all mankind. In this way, a disciple must seek to imitate perfectly the heavenly Father. By so doing, a disciple will be "*made perfect*" in the eyes of Jesus. Therefore, a spirit of unconditional love is of the essence of Christian Discipleship--it causes God's reign. In the human heart where love reigns supreme, God supremely reigns.

The writers of the New Testament were aware that the concept of love carried many different meanings. The inspired writers, in order to make clear and certain that which they knew to be the love of the heavenly Father, used the word "*agape*" to express this love. They differentiated *agape* from the generally accepted definitions of love. Jesus was speaking of this love when He said of the heavenly Father: "*... his sun rises on the bad and the good, he rains on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45).*" This speaks of God's indiscriminate love towards all mankind, which, according to the evangelist John, defines God. It is God's nature to love in such a way, and no outside influence can alter the nature of God. In other words, no matter how unloving people may be or how unlovable they may become, no matter how much they disdain God, regardless of their personal hatred or indifference to God--nothing is changed within God. God's love remains constant toward creation; God continues to work for the salvation of all. This is *agape*.

Nevertheless, in regard to human beings, it is wise to recall that there is the dimension of free will. This freedom is part of God's love for mankind; it will never be taken away. As a person can hide from the sun and the rain, so can he reject the love of God. A person can willfully impede the workings of God's love within his life. St. Augustine clearly understood this and taught that the God who made us without our consent, cannot save us without our consent. That would violate our

freedom of will. A human being must freely will to be saved, which implies choosing the means of salvation. A person sincerely seeking the reign of God opens his life to the full force of God's love. Here is the necessary freedom for the heavenly Father to accomplish all that His heart desires for this person. The Divine Will, in regard to a disciple, comes to fulfillment in a disciple being made perfect as the *"heavenly Father is perfect."*

John the Evangelist constantly used the verb form instead of the noun to express agape-love. He saw Divine Love as Divine Action. Such love causes things to be--to happen. Love best expresses itself in action. To define the love which created the universe is not easy. Seeking to embrace its spirit, indeed, stretches the human mind beyond its natural borders. The spirit is called into a dimension of infinity. Already the human heart is made restless with only the created. Such conscious awareness caused Augustine to cry: *"Our hearts were made for thee O Lord and they will not rest until they rest in Thee."* Did not Jesus teach: *"Do not lay up for yourselves an earthly treasure ... Remember, where your treasure is, there your heart is also (Mt. 6:19,21)."* The heart which seeks but earthly treasures will soon dry up and die. Jesus encouraged His disciples to be *"single hearted,"* which implied seeking the Father's reign and *"his way of holiness"* with all the energies of one's soul. Jesus implies that such people constantly *"see God"* in the small and great moments of their lives. From the teachings of Jesus, the disciple discovers agape-love to be the essential spirit of Christian Discipleship.

As agape-love is a creative and active power, it is best understood in action and through personal experience. There comes a time when we have to stop hearing sermons and start seeing sermons--start being the sermon if the message is to be understood. Someone once said that *"the message is in the message."* In a word, the effect upon the person is the message. Remember the saying, *"What you are cries so loud that I cannot hear what you are saying!"* Because a disciple can only be made perfect through the exercise of agape-love, the disciple needs to see agape-love in action in order to come to a concrete and practical understanding of it. From the examples of Christ-in-action, the disciple can come to understand the nature of Christian Action: *"What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do (Jn. 13:15)."* Jesus, as humanity's Teacher, teaches us how to love with the Father's love through the examples and episodes of His earthly life--within His public



ministry. His examples show the disciple the way to achieve perfection of heart. As Matthew narrates these examples, we see that Jesus teaches with authority, but that He heals with love.

Jesus dismisses the class upon the mountainside. How nice it would have been to remain always in that class! To borrow the words of Peter: "*Master, how good it is for us to be here (Lk. 9:33).*" It was good to be there but apparently better to leave. Jesus leads the disciples down the mountain into the work-field. Now they will see the reign of God in practice and discover how they too must one day live in order to "*be called sons of God.*"

As Matthew's narrative unfolds, we would be wise to look upon ourselves as students and beginners in the Christian spirit, to observe closely the behavior of Jesus and seek to understand the truths taught within the concrete deeds of His life. We need to see and understand these practical applications of Christian principles within the circumstances of daily life. We would do well to imitate Mary's behavior: "*Mary treasured all these things and reflected upon them in her heart (Lk. 2:19).*" "*His mother meanwhile kept all these things in memory (Lk. 2:51).*"

Jesus and His disciples came down the mountain to encounter the "*great crowds.*" Matthew relates: "*When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him (Mt. 8:1).*" Going up the mountain had *not* been an escape from the crowd but a preparation for returning to the "*great crowds*" and working amidst them as "*the salt of the earth*" and "*the light of the world.*" As far as the first disciples were concerned, at this point they had a long way to go before being either salt or light. One of them, we know, never made it.

Matthew wisely selects deeds and sayings from the life of Jesus with the set purpose of instructing Christians on how to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, both in intention and in action. We need to see these episodes from the life of Jesus as personal teachings to us. There is always the danger, however, that the students will get lost in the illustrations and examples, and miss the points being made. Before we enter into this "*field-experience*" we would do well to call to mind again the admonition of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council:

*And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk*

*together; for "we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings."*

*Vatican II - Div. Rev. VI:25*

Without that enlightenment that comes through prayer, our thoughts are, in the words of Jerome, no more than rocks skipping across a frozen pond.

In the section following the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew recounts ten miracles performed by Jesus. The first three are grouped together for memorization purposes. These three miracles teach important truths concerning the reign of God and the mission of Jesus. The healing of a leper heads the list of cures. We read:

*Suddenly a leper came forward and did him homage, saying to him, "Sir, if you will to do so, you can cure me." Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said, "I do will it. Be cured." Immediately the man's leprosy disappeared. Then Jesus said to him: "See to it that you tell no one. Go and show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses prescribed. That should be the proof they need." Mt. 8:2-4*

The choice of this cure as the first miracle described by Matthew is deliberate. The healing of the leper carries a significant message to the readers.

First, let us recall the Jewish mentality towards illness and physical afflictions. A popular belief existed among the Jews that such things occurred as a result of sin--either personal sin or the sins of one's parents. The disease could not be cured until the sin was forgiven and expiated. At that time, the medical profession was not popular among pious Jews. One of the most grievous of all afflictions was leprosy. We read in Leviticus:

*The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, "Unclean, unclean!" As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp. Lev. 13:45-46*

For all practical purposes, as long as the person had the disease he was legally and socially dead. The leper suffered excommunication. Not only could he not socialize with other people, but he could not worship with them. He was unable to fulfill the obligation to publicly worship Yahweh. This cut him off from his religion and—in his eyes and that of others—cut him off from God. For all practical purposes, the leper was a lost soul. Understandably, he suffered great guilt and shame in the most despairing of human conditions. He could have little hope.

At the time of Jesus, anyone would have been classified as a leper who had one of the three types of Hansen's disease, as well as certain general skin diseases such as psoriasis, depigmentation of the skin (vitiligo), and elephantiasis.

When we keep in mind the relationship between disease and sin, we can better understand what the leper implies by the request: "*Sir, if you will to do so, you can cure me.*" To "*cure*" the leper would be equivalent to removing his sins—to saving him. We recall the case of Naaman in the Old Testament. When the king of Aram sent his servant Naaman to the king of Israel, he addressed this letter to the king:

*"With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When he read the letter, the king of Israel tore his garments and exclaimed: "Am I a god with power over life and death, that this man should send someone to me to be cured of leprosy?..." When Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his garment, he sent word to the king: "Why have you torn your garments? Let him come to me and find out that there is a prophet in Israel."*

*Kgs. 5:6-8*

From the Old Testament text, we see that the cure of leprosy is equivalent to bringing back the dead. This demands Divine Power—an act of God. Such a deed could only be accomplished by "*the man of God.*" This is precisely the point Matthew wishes to make: Jesus is "*the man of God.*"

In Jesus is the divine Presence of God. The leper calls Jesus *kyrie*, or *lord*-a divine title conferred on Jesus by the early Church. The scene pictures one of adoration: "*he came forward and did him homage.*" The words of the leper express the belief that Jesus possesses the power to remove the

barriers which separate man from man, and man from God. If Jesus wills--He can save: "*If you will to do so, you can cure me.*" Mark says that Jesus was "*moved with pity (Mk. 1:40).*" This calls to mind the words of Jesus recorded by Luke: "*Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate (Lk. 6:36).*" However, Matthew makes no mention of feelings or emotions in Jesus: "*Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said, 'I do will it. Be cured.'*" Matthew presents this as a naked act of the will, devoid of any emotion. Good will towards others is the essence of agape-love. Good feelings and nice emotions are not. They may accompany the act of love and make it pleasant and easier. However, love or good will must be *there* when nice feelings and good emotions are absent, even when the feelings demand and encourage contrary actions. When the time came in which obedience unto death was demanded of Jesus, He did not receive any help from His feelings and emotions. The opposite was true: Naked will carried Him through--"*Thy will be done!*"

It is becoming obvious that this miracle symbolizes the act of redemption in which Jesus willfully accepted death upon the cross in order to free mankind from sin, and reunite human beings with God. The miracle expresses the primary effect of God's reign in Jesus--the salvation from sin through the blood of Jesus. It demonstrates to the disciples the extent of good will demanded by the reign of God.

Matthew relates that Jesus touched the leper. He touched the contaminated, the untouchable--but "*the man of God*" remained uncontaminated. Here there is a whisper of the Incarnation--a love so great and personal that God, in his Son, became one with sinful creatures. He came in touch with them and put them again in touch with Love--with God our heavenly Father.

Jesus commands the man to tell no one but to go show himself to the priest and make the offering prescribed by the law in Chapter Fourteen of Leviticus. By the act of sending the man to the priest, Jesus accepts the means established by God by which the "*saved*" man is reinstated back into the People of God, and readmitted to divine worship by an appointed minister--the priest. Jesus silences the witness of the man because God, not man, must verify to Israel the claims of Jesus. This cure is a Divine deed. It testifies to the priest--an official representative of the religion--that there is a prophet in Israel. Jesus tells the man: "*That should be the proof they need (Mt. 8:4).*"

Matthew narrates the second miracle:

*As Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion approached him with this request: "Sir, my serving boy is at home in bed paralyzed, suffering painfully." He said to him, "I will come and cure him." "Sir", the centurion said in reply, "I am not worthy to have you under my roof. Just give an order and my boy will get better. I am a man under authority myself and I have troops assigned to me. If I give one man the order, 'Dismissed,' off he goes. If I say to another, 'Come here, he comes. If I tell my slave, 'Do this,' he does it." Jesus showed amazement on hearing this and remarked to his followers, "I assure you, I have never found this much faith in Israel. Mark what I say! Many will come from the east and west and will find a place at the banquet in the kingdom of God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, while the natural heirs of the kingdom will be driven out into the dark. Wailing will be heard there, and the grinding of teeth." To the centurion Jesus said, "Go home. It shall be done because you trusted." That very moment the boy got better.*

*Mt. 8:5-13*

### JESUS AND THE GENTILE

The first miracle occurred someplace between the mountain and the city of Capernaum. The location for the miracle suggests the social alienation suffered by the leper. We note that the curing of the centurion's servant occurred within the city. The centurion was not legally ostracized from Jewish society. However, as far as the attitude of pious Jews went, this type of man, who came to Jesus, was a moral leper. As his title indicates, he was a centurion--a soldier in charge of about a hundred soldiers. The Roman government exempted Jews from military service. We presume that the man was a pagan, and pious customs forbade Jews to enter into the house of a pagan or to dine with one. Presumably, such contact caused ritual contamination, making a person unfit to worship God. Pagans were often referred to as *pigs* and *dogs*. When a pious Jew reentered the Holy Land, it was customary for him to shake off the dust of a pagan land from his sandals and clothing.

This centurion and his sick servant represented still another group of human beings alienated from communion with God--in this case because

of their false religious beliefs. The young servant of the centurion lay paralyzed, which explained his inability to come to Jesus himself; another must go for him and intercede on his behalf. Here we have a good example of intercessory prayer with Jesus. When the centurion informed Jesus of the case--and even before making the request--Jesus immediately responded to the situation with "*I will come and cure him.*" If Jesus had entered the house of this pagan He would have scandalized the Pharisees. In the study of the Acts, we saw that one of the reasons the Jews rejected Christianity stemmed from the fact that the Church offered salvation equally to the pagans. This incident indicates Jesus' good-will toward all mankind and teaches that He has come to save all. Jesus Christ is the loving Savior of the World!

The Pharisees and their scribes could not distinguish between ritual impurity and the internal contamination which corrupts the heart. As far as they understood, both caused the same effects. Jesus taught that a vital distinction exists between what is only externally done and what occurs within the heart. He taught his disciples not to be afraid of external and interpersonal communication with sinners. If they entered into such communication with God's love, they would not be contaminated. Sin, they must avoid; sin has its roots in the human heart, not in mere social contact. Only when the disciples lost that singleness of heart and no longer sought to "*see God*" in their deeds did sin gain entrance into their hearts and turn them towards selfish pursuits. Father Judge spoke of the disciples as being "*sunshine that moves and splashes in dirty places and is never soiled.*" The light of the world does not lose its brightness by shining within a darkened world--it is manifested in such an environment.

In this incident, the centurion appears as a human being concerned with the affliction of another. He is moved by compassion and, even though he is a pagan, he is more "*in spirit*" with Jesus than many of the Jews. Even though his religious beliefs may be false, his religious spirit is more genuine than the religious spirits of many people who profess correct beliefs. Theologians have called people who live in a spirit of religious truth, but without a formal profession in the faith, "*implied Christians.*" Their Christianity is discerned, not by what they profess with their lips, but by how they live--at heart they are Christian.

In the case at hand, the centurion not only possesses a compassionate heart for the afflicted, but he has true faith in Jesus. He possesses a true and proper faith, which certainly puts him in contrast with many of the pious Jews surrounding Jesus. He demonstrates faith in the power of Jesus' words, which expresses the essence of Gentile faith--the faith of those who would one day be blessed because they believed without seeing the person of Jesus. Jesus expresses this faith to Thomas in these words: "*You became a believer because you saw me. Blest are they who have not seen and have believed (Jn. 20:29).*" The centurion gives this rationale for his belief: He is a man possessing authority. Because he possesses authority, his word alone is sufficient to cause things to happen as far as people are concerned. "*If I give one man the order, 'Dismissed,' off he goes. If I say to another, 'Come here,' he comes.*" Obviously the deeds of Jesus revealed that He possessed divine authority, therefore His word was sufficient to cause things to happen; His physical Presence was not demanded.

The centurion was a man of authority, but also a man of humility. He knew the limits of his authority and of his position in life. The authority of Jesus far exceeded that of earthly authority. The centurion concluded that a man of such authority was to be esteemed above men of earthly authority. He confessed being unworthy to receive Jesus into his home. He insisted that Jesus' word alone was sufficient to effect a cure, even at a great distance. In essence, the Word of Jesus possessed the power to save the paralyzed young man, who actually represented the Gentile world, paralyzed in sin and unable to come to God through Jesus. Jesus must come to them. However, He would not come in His physical person. Men and women with the compassion and faith of the centurion would bring the power of Jesus into the paralyzed, sinful Gentile world. "*I will come and save him!*"

This miracle serves to illustrate a direct teaching by Jesus. Explicitly, it is a teaching miracle. Jesus uses the faith of the centurion to draw a contrast between the faith of "*the natural heirs of the kingdom*" and the faith of the Gentiles. Jesus emphasizes the results of this particular quality of faith. He recalls the popular concept of a great messianic banquet to be held at the end of the world, in which the faithful would celebrate the triumph of the Messiah. The banquet illustrates the union of God with His People, achieved by the Messiah. It is a symbol of eternal bliss. With this teaching, Jesus stresses the utmost importance of

faith in Himself--the Incarnate Word of God. He teaches that many Gentiles would come to salvation, whereas, many of the children of Israel--*"the natural heirs of the kingdom"*--would be rejected and excluded from eternal salvation. Jesus emphasizes that the request of the centurion had been granted on the strength of his trust in Jesus. He *trusted* in the word of Jesus; he relied upon it. He was not afraid to lean upon it--to stake his life and reputation upon it!

### IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

The third miracle occurred within the household of Simon Peter. As related by Matthew, this miracle occurred almost automatically--as the thing for Jesus to do inside the household of Simon Peter. There was no request for a miracle--only the need for one. We read: *"Jesus entered Peter's house and found Peter's mother-in-law in bed with a fever. He took her by the hand and the fever left her. She got up at once and began to wait on him (Mt. 8:14-15)."* In this miracle, we again note the personal *"touch."* Jesus took the hand of the sick woman. She was powerfully affected by this personal touch. She was healed--saved.

The first miracle was done for a leper, the second for a pagan, and the third for a woman. What did all three have in common? Perhaps we see here an illustration of the universal mission of Jesus. Jewish women were not in the same legal and moral state as the leper and the pagan, but their state was indeed, one of second class citizenship among the People of God--or even less. The miracle symbolized Jesus restoring the woman to her proper place within the kingdom of heaven. We note, from this recorded incident, that this *place* implied serving Him. Her behavior exemplifies what should be the reaction of those healed and saved by the power of Jesus: they should all serve Him as Lord.

Paul understood the truth of membership within the kingdom of God when he wrote:

*All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with him. There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free man, male or female, all are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ you are the descendants of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised.*

*Gal. 3:27-29*



It is worthy of note that this miracle occurred within the house of Simon Peter--which may well symbolize the Christian Church. All within a Jewish household were under the authority of the head of the house. In this case Peter was the visible head of this house, but as he had accepted Jesus as *Rabboni*, Jesus was the true authority in this household and as such, moved with proper authority, and freely blessed its members. The relationship of those with Jesus inside the household is not the same as with those outside of it. Inside the house--the Church, Jesus possesses a liberty of operation denied to Him by those outside the household--outside the Church. There is no absence of Love on the part of Christ, but since those outside the Church did not submit to Christ, the reign of God has not been extended over to them. Jesus awaits their coming to Him, or perhaps others telling them about Him. Jesus awaits for the request or submission which gives Him the freedom to move within their lives as Savior. He is always free to move within the lives of the members of the Church, unless willfully impeded by a member.

The words of the centurion implied the superior power of Jesus. The cases of the leper and the afflicted mother-in-law demonstrated this power. Matthew records:

*As evening drew on, they brought him many who were possessed. He expelled the spirits by a simple command and cured all who were afflicted ...* *Mt. 8:16*

From Mark's account, we know that the people waited until the Sabbath had ended to bring the sick. This text makes clearer the non-worldliness of Jesus' power. It is a power superior to that of evil spirits that inflicts human beings with sufferings.

Many within the ancient world attributed all illness and disease to the power of evil spirits. The Jews--for the most part--possessed a more balanced doctrine, in the sense that they didn't attribute all illnesses to evil spirits. They recognized certain illnesses as the work of evil spirits, but others they saw as flowing from the punitive will of God. There were exorcists, among both Jews and pagans, and there existed elaborate exorcism rituals. Matthew clearly indicates the superior power of Jesus when he says that Jesus "*expelled the spirits*" by a simple word. He demonstrated the power that dwelt within the word of Jesus, and not in a ritual. In Jesus, the stronger confronts the weaker and despoils him. Again

the power of Jesus' word is demonstrated. Devils immediately obey the word of Jesus whereas many people resist doing so. Of such resistance demons are made.

### THE CURE AND THE COST

Matthew stresses the compassionate love of Jesus to be the motivating factor of His Divine deeds. He demonstrates Jesus to be as compassionate as the heavenly Father, compassion that leads Jesus to vicariously assume the burdens and sufferings of humanity. This implies that Jesus assumes the sinful state of mankind without assuming the personal condition of sin. Jesus assumes not the sin, but the evil effects of sin. By doing so He becomes the Redeemer. Matthew writes: "... *thereby fulfilling what has been said through Isaiah the prophet: It was our infirmities he bore, our sufferings he endured (Mt. 8:17).*" Matthew reveals the great personal act of love involved in these cures. Sin makes such evil possible within the lives of human beings. Jesus will suffer to expiate such sins and deliver mankind from its evil effects. Matthew has presented three deeds which symbolically express the extent of the redemptive love of Jesus. At this point Matthew recalls a verse from Isaiah which brings to mind the Suffering Servant of Yahweh:

*Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the Lord lay upon him the guilt of us all.*  
*Is. 53:5-6*

Matthew does not want his readers to be impressed only with the deeds of Jesus, but also wants to impress them with His surpassing love. Jesus works with ease the cures for which He must dearly pay. This is the first indication that Jesus will be "*pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins (Is. 53:5).*"

Power, whether spiritual or temporal, impresses many people. They are drawn to it and to those possessing it. They often seek to possess it for selfish motives and, if possessed, use it contemptuously and without compassion for their subjects. Some have been attracted to spiritual power for the wrong motives. We had the example in Acts, of Simon the Magician seeking spiritual power for evil motives. Matthew relates that seeing these miracles inspires certain people to become disciples of

Jesus. He probably implies that there is a relationship between what has occurred and the desire to be a disciple. We read:

*Seeing the people crowd around him, Jesus gave orders to cross to the other shore. A scribe approached him and said, "Teacher, wherever you go I will come after you." Jesus said to him, "The foxes have lairs, the birds in the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another, a disciple, said to him, "Lord, let me go and bury my father first." But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead."* Mt. 8:18-22

Jesus' words imply that those who do not follow Him, whatever their relationship may be to a disciple, are already dead.

Again, Jesus emphasizes that the reign of God demands sacrifice of self. When one sees only the deeds, one sees only the effects of God's reign. One may seek the effects of the reign--the power--and, yet, reject the reign itself and, therefore, salvation. For this reason, Jesus stresses the power needed by the disciple to love with singleness of heart rather than the power to work miracles. Such love will always work miracles, and willingly pay the price to do so...

Matthew now relates a scene at sea in which the disciples are suddenly caught in a storm with Jesus asleep in their boat. We read:

*He got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning a violent storm came up on the lake, and the boat began to be swamped by the waves. Jesus was sleeping soundly, so they made their way toward him and woke him: "Lord, save us! We are lost!" He said to them: "Where is your courage? How little faith you have!" Then he stood up and took the winds and the sea to task. Complete calm ensued; the men were dumbfounded. "What sort of man is this," they said, "that even the winds and the sea obey him?"* Mt. 8:23-27

Jesus commands the wind and the sea as he commands the evil spirits, and with the same obedient results.

Matthew relates that Jesus is asleep in the boat. In the early Church, the death of a Christian was spoken of as "*falling asleep in the Lord.*" Within its historical setting, this miracle confirms the extraordinary power of Jesus over the powers of nature. Jesus' words imply that fear is out of place when the disciples are with Him. Their fear of external evils and circumstances is groundless. They are but opportunities for expressions of faith and for manifestations of the power and presence of the invisible Christ. No power in the heavens or on earth can destroy them. A disciple without faith lacks the courage to face the difficulties of discipleship. Fear and cowardice imply a lack of faith which greatly displeases Jesus. It expresses doubt in Him, and perhaps in His love.

Symbolically, this miracle pictures the Church in the world after the death of Jesus. The "*boat*" represents the Church in which Jesus is present. There will be times when violent persecutions will break upon the Church like a sudden storm. Amidst the storm it may even seem as if the Church will be destroyed. However, the word of Christ cannot be destroyed, and the Church will endure on earth until the end of time. Jesus is Lord above all these circumstances, and His saving power will be manifested amidst them. Jesus demands courage in the middle of crisis situations, for such courage implies faith and confidence in His Word--particularly faith in those words with which Matthew's gospel will end: "*And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world (Mt. 28:20)!*"

### JESUS AND THE DEMONS

Matthew goes on to demonstrate the climax of Jesus' earthly power in a confrontation with two possessed men who lived in a tomb and terrified people within the district around Gadara. It was a Gentile area, and the possessed were filled with deadly forces, which the people had reason to fear. (See Mt. 8:28-32) This episode emphasizes the complete power of Jesus over forces of evil. In the presence of Jesus Christ, these evil powers are negligible and are dismissed by a word.

The disciples of Jesus ought to be liberated from all fear of demonic or diabolic forces. When in Jesus, these forces are non-existent for the disciple--dismissed with a word. In the Epistle of James, we are told: "*Resist the devil and he will flee (Jms 4:7)*". With Jesus' permission, the demons entered a herd of swine--a more fitting dwelling for unclean spirits than the human spirit. The demons and the pigs were hurled into

the sea "*and were drowned.*" This symbolizes the power of Jesus to destroy all evil. The only power which should concern a disciple of Jesus is the Power of God.

These dark powers sensed in the power that expelled them what human beings would only slowly realize in the power that redeems them: Jesus Christ is the Son of God. However this power which destroys demons can create great fear in sinners. The action of Jesus instilled fear within the people of Gadara, and "*the entire town came out to meet Jesus ... and begged him to leave their neighborhood (Mt. 8:34).*" Their acceptance of Jesus must wait for another day--perhaps for the day when they may experience, in the disciples of Jesus, the irresistible power of God's Love...



## CHAPTER 10

### FOR LOVE OF THE CROWDS

#### INTRODUCTION

When Matthew relates that Jesus led His disciples into "*the Gadarene boundary (Mt. 8:28)*," we are being informed that they have entered pagan territory. Gadara was a Hellenistic city in eastern Palestine, one of the so-called "Ten Cities" (Decapolis). The city lay about six miles inward from the sea of Galilee. Even to this day ancient ruins of a theater, an aqueduct, and tombs can still be seen at the site. On Jesus' journey to Gadara, he encountered two mad men possessed by demons. These men terrorized all the people who lived in the region and who passed their way. Mark relates the same incident, but with more colorful details. Jesus fearlessly confronted these forces of evil. The disciples were probably somewhat behind Him, following at a safe distance. As in the incident at sea, Jesus could once again ask: "*Where is your courage? How little faith you have (Mt. 8:26)!*"

Jesus' admonition to the disciples implies that faith provides one with the courage to remain fearless before the forces of evil in this world. These experiences "in the field" with Jesus were intended to instill, increase, and perfect the disciples' faith in Jesus Christ. Obviously, the source of the disciples' courage would not lay within their weak natures, but rest upon the presence of Jesus within their lives--a Presence in whom they must possess absolute faith. By such faith they would conquer the world. John the evangelist later writes:

*Everyone begotten of God conquers the world, and the power that has conquered the world is this faith of ours. Who, then, is the conqueror of the world? The one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*

*I Jn. 5:4-5*

The two men meeting Jesus in pagan territory represent the evil power which dominates a world alienated from God. Again, John the evangelist teaches: "*We know that we belong to God, while the whole world is under the evil one (I Jn. 5:19)*." The great forces of evil in the world today cause

many to live in constant fear. We coexist with great destructive forces--created by the genius of man--capable of destroying life on this planet. Few doubt what the outcome will be if such forces fall into the hands of mad men. To Christians today, Jesus might again say: "*Where is your courage? How little faith you have!*" Again, John the evangelist writes: "*For there is One greater in you than there is in the world (I Jn. 4:4).*" The salvation of the earth cannot depend upon massive powers of destruction but upon the divine power in Christ. In Christ, the Christian Community has its example. Evil must not be ignored but rather confronted with proper power. Evil must be called by its name and cast out. From the pigs' destruction in the sea, we have a good example of the power of evil to destroy and terrorize all who are not "in Christ." "*Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...that the world might be saved through him (Jn. 3:16-17).*"

God came to save the world "in Christ," and the Church--as the Body of Christ--must assume the responsibility of Savior of the World with courage and faith. It is precisely now that the Church must face this evil with courage and faith, since the very survival of the world has become imperiled by the existence of instruments of vast, unknowable, destructive capabilities. Christians must decide *in whom* they trust, Christ or Antichrist? In this day of false Messiahs, it is not always easy to discern the Christ from the Antichrist. Matthew writes of Jesus: "*At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd (Mt. 9:36).*"

However, the sheep of the Lord have not been left in this world without a shepherd. Jesus raised up some Good Shepherds within the Christian Community: Peter and his successors. Matthew will later make it clear that Jesus chose Simon Peter to replace Him as leader of the Church on earth as did Moses when he chose Joshua. We know that wolves dressed in sheep's clothing will be present within the Christian Community. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns:

*Be on your guard against false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but underneath are wolves on the prowl. You will know them by their deeds.*  
Mt. 7:15

The words of Paul to the elders of Ephesus--when gathered at Miletus--cannot be repeated often enough in our day:



*Keep watch over yourselves, and over the whole flock the Holy Spirit has given you to guard. Shepherd the church of God, which he has acquired at the price of his own blood. I know that when I am gone, savage wolves will come among you who will not spare the flock. From your own number, men will present themselves distorting the truth and leading astray any who follow them. Be on guard, therefore.* Acts 20:28-31

There is a concentrated effort today among many so-called "Christian ministers"--often heard on radio and T.V.--to destroy faith and confidence in the Catholic Church, the Mother Church of Christianity. In particular, they strive to negate the influence of its Chief Shepherd, the Pope, to whom they refer as everything from a good but deluded man to "the false prophet" or the "Antichrist" of the Apocalypse. All of this should come as no surprise if the Pope truly is the Vicar of Christ on earth. Jesus warns the Church: "*If they call the head of the house Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! Do not let them intimidate you (Mt. 25-26).*" These enemies of the Catholic Church never tire of advertising the weeds within the Catholic Church--which they diligently search for and rejoice over when found--while at the same time, they scrupulously avoid mentioning the wheat--which they blithely ignore. This injustice alone reveals their hypocrisy and prejudice. "*By their fruits you will know them.*" Toward the end of his life Father Judge, the Founder of the Missionary Cenacle Apostolate, gave this admonition to the members of the Missionary Cenacle:

*I know not what evils the future will launch upon us, but remember, never be found in any faction or schism opposing Rome. If an Angel of heaven were to come down on earth and war against the Papacy, refuse to surrender your allegiance to the Pope. Rally around the Pope for he is the standard-bearer of the Cross.*

Today as the Church faces the problem of the existence of the most destructive evil ever to rest within the hands of men, we Catholics ought to find ourselves standing solidly, with courage and faith, with our Good Shepherd--the Vicar of Christ on earth.

Jesus Christ confronts the destructive powers of evil without compromise. He forcefully expels them. Stalin once said, "*When you meet a wolf you*

*shoot him first, then you have a dialogue with him.*" Christ does not coexist with evil forces. They are mutually exclusive of each other. As Paul writes:

*After all, what do righteousness and lawlessness have in common, or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What accord is there between Christ and Belial? II Cor. 6:14-15*

Jesus confronts the people that are confirmed in evil and beyond redemption with a superior power, causing either submission or expulsion. He came into the world to free it from slavery and dominion by these people, not to bargain or coexist with them.

Many people in this world coexist with evil and co-operate with it. Even Israel longed to return to the slavery of Egypt when it began to experience the painful price of freedom and maturity. The story is told of a social worker who rescued an old lady out of the dirt of poverty, and returned to find her again with her old dirty sheets on the bed. The old lady said she was just not comfortable in all that cleanliness. Certain people do not wish to be freed of all their devils--only from certain ones. It has been observed that some people fear the love of God more than the wrath of God. They have learned to live with divine abandonment and fear the changes demanded by God's creative love. People who experience only the authority of God fear a personal encounter with the Lord. They may fear His rejection, or they may fear the demands His love may make upon their infirm hearts. John the evangelist wisely observes:

*Love has no room for fear; rather, perfect love casts out all fear. And since fear has to do with punishment, love is not yet perfect in one who is afraid. I Jn. 4:18*

As he relates the visit to the Gadarene district, Matthew mentions possessed people, savage behavior, shrieks of terror, fear, destruction, and tombs. Such is the world without Christ. Christ complies with the wishes of the People of Gadara when "*they begged him to leave their neighborhood (Mt. 8:34).*" Jesus' compliance with their wishes demonstrates the great respect in which God holds human freedom. Augustine teaches that the salvation coming through Christ must be freely accepted.

In the Gadara incident, we see that a fear of Christ can impede acceptance of the salvation He brings. However, the power of Christ must be demonstrated

in the world before human beings will possess the freedom to come to Christ. The presence of evil in the world, and within the lives of people, hinders their coming to Christ and to salvation. Christ leaves Gadara and returns "to his own town." One day the power of evil in this world will be destroyed--The Prince of this world will be overcome--then the disciples of Jesus Christ will be free to bring the saving love of God into the whole world,

to all who sit in darkness and dwell in the region of death. As the poet Thompson once wrote, "*Fear wists not to evade as love wists to pursue.*" One day, through His apostles and disciples, Jesus will pursue in love those who presently reject Him from fear.

### JESUS RECEIVES SINNERS

Matthew relates that the disciples return with Jesus to Capernaum. This city is now referred to as Jesus' "own town." Capernaum becomes the basis of His operation in Galilee; presumably, Jesus makes His headquarters in the home of Simon Peter. Archeologists believe that they have discovered the dwelling place of Peter in Tell Hum--once the site of the city of Capernaum--the house of Peter being located only a short distance from the ruins of the ancient synagogue in Capernaum.

We are informed that when Jesus returns to his "own town," some people bring to Him a paralytic. Mark records this same incident but much more dramatically than does Matthew. In Mark we find Jesus teaching in the house, surrounded by such a large crowd that four friends of the paralytic carried him up onto the roof, made an opening in it, and lowered him down beside Jesus. Matthew simply states:

*Then he reentered the boat, made the crossing and came back to his own town. There the people at once brought to him a paralyzed man lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic, "Have courage, son, your sins are forgiven." At that some of the scribes said to themselves, "The man blasphemes." Jesus was aware of what they were thinking and said: "Why do you harbor evil thoughts? Which is less trouble to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Stand up and walk'? To help you realize that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--he then said to the paralyzed man--"Stand up! Roll up your mat, and go home." The man stood up and went toward his home. At the sight, a*

*feeling of awe came over the crowd, and they praised God for giving such authority to men.* Mt. 9:1-8

Paul writes: "*God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Rm. 2:16).*" Jesus judges the spiritual condition of this man to be sinful, clearly implying that this man has personally sinned. Jesus expels devils and demons, but not sinful human beings. He does not drive sinners away. He receives this sinner with compassion and declares to him, "*Have courage, son, your sins are forgiven.*" Jesus seeks to incite courage--not fear-- in sinners who come to Him to be healed.

Modern science discovers more and more evidence that there is a direct relationship between the physical and the spiritual dimensions of a human being. The spiritual and mental condition of a person has a direct effect upon that person's physical health. There is such a close relationship between the physical and the spiritual conditions that we can safely state that to cure the body without curing the soul will effect only a temporary cure. When we look at mankind's final end, we know that spiritual health ought to take precedence over physical well-being. Jesus insists that physical infirmity should be preferred over eternal spiritual loss. "*Better to lose part of your body than to have all cast into Gehenna (Mt. 5:29).*"

In this incident with the paralytic, Matthew seeks to illustrate that Jesus has come to save sinners, not to reject and condemn them. This point is clearly illustrated by Jesus forgiving the sins of this man brought to Him in faith. We see, in this particular case, that the sinner is unable to come to Jesus on his own. He depends upon friends to bring him and stand by him until forgiven and healed.

For reasons certainly not clear to us, God Wills to work in this world in a particular way. For our part we constantly fantasize about God and how a god *ought* to work among men. Once enrolled in the school of Christian Discipleship, we should be willing to disregard our divine fantasies in the face of the divine reality, as presented in the New Testament. From New Testament evidence, it becomes very clear that the eternal salvation of human beings depends upon other human beings. First of all, people are saved through the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ. They must, one way or the other, be brought to faith in Jesus, and into contact with Him. Many cannot do this on their own. Their salvation truly rests upon the charity and zeal of others.

However, how much more convenient, but indeed deadly for our lazy spirits, to think that since God *can* do it all with no dependence upon human action, God *should* do it all with no dependence upon human action. People are saved, not according to our fantasies, but in keeping with the Will of God. Scripture reveals an interdependence among human beings for salvation. Presently, it may be more convenient to our slothful souls to hold otherwise, but it may cause us great discomfort on judgment day to discover that certain people--even loved ones--were lost because of our indifference, ignorance, fear, and selfishness. Often we prefer that people should like us rather than that we should have loved them. We remain too silent. That people are lost because of our neglect will indeed be a sorrow to bear into eternity. How great will be our need for the mercy of God. Paul writes: "*Faith, then, comes through hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ (Rm. 10:17).*" Paul places these searching questions before the Christian Community:

*But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?  
And how can they believe unless they have heard of him? And  
how can they hear unless there is someone to preach?*

*Rm. 10:14*

Often the only voice to carry the good news to another is yours! Remember that God does not reject sinners, but we often do. If we fail, in prudent effort, to bring sinners to Jesus, we may in the end be rejected as "*evildoers.*" If we cannot bring people to Jesus, we can always bring Jesus to them through our loving concern for them. There are very few people before whose doors we will be able to stand and shake off the dust from our clothing. A zealous disciple ought to seek prudently--not anxiously or fearfully--the conversion of others. The story is told of a Christian woman who invited pagan children into her swimming pool in order to secretly baptize them. She was known within the family circle as "*the baptizer.*"

For the first time Matthew notes a negative reaction to Jesus Christ. It comes from the lawyers--the scribes. When Jesus declares the paralyzed man free of sin, they judge Him to be a blasphemer: "*The man blasphemes.*" Direct blasphemy is any word or action which dishonors the Person of God. People blaspheme when they deny the divine attributes of God, or attribute to man what pertains solely to God. We read in Mark:

*Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves:  
“Why does the man talk in that way? He commits blasphemy!  
Who can forgive sins except God alone?”* Mk. 2:6-7

From their study of the Scriptures, the scribes know sin to be an offense against the Will of God. Therefore, only the offended person may forgive the offense--only God can forgive sin. They conclude that Jesus--a man--assumes a divine prerogative, and this is blasphemous for any man. As far as reason goes, they are correct in their deduction. However, their reason could carry them further into the matter, if they would be willing to accept certain marvelous possibilities. One could be that God now Wills to offer forgiveness of sin through this “*man of God*”--this prophet of God. Or, an even more marvelous possibility, in some unique fashion God is present in Jesus and God forgives in Jesus. Had not Isaiah said of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh: “*If he gives his life as an offering for sin ... he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses (Is. 53:10-11).*”

Jesus seeks to help the scribes realize that one of these marvelous possibilities could really be true. As already mentioned, people believed a cure could come only after the sin had been forgiven. Seeking to appeal to their legal minds, Jesus asked: “*Which is less trouble to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Stand up and walk?’*” Now, to their minds, the same divine power would have been required to do one or the other. To assist their belief, Jesus cures the paralytic. If these scribes had been men sincerely open to the spirit of God, they would have at least followed the example of Mary and suspended judgment—“*treasured all these things and reflected on them in (their hearts).*”. Perhaps they would have come to a saving truth.

However, things are not as they ought to be with these scribes. Jesus hints at this when He asks: “*Why do you harbor evil thoughts?*” This seems to imply not only error but bad will. There appears to be an unwillingness to accept the truth, regardless of the evidence which supports it. Remember, Jesus had already sent proof to the priests in the temple that a prophet existed in Israel, the proof being the cure of the leper. “*That should be the proof they need (Mt. 8:4).*” Jesus gives the scribes “*the proof they need*”—“*To help you realize that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (Mt. 9:6).*”

At this point, the reaction of the scribes remains in question, but not that of the crowd. Those people “at the grass roots” give an adequate response:

“... a feeling of awe came over the crowd.” They got the message and so “they praised God for giving such authority to men (Mt. 9:8).” Jesus speaks of the Son of Man possessing authority on earth to forgive sins. Matthew speaks of the people praising God for giving such power *not* to a man but to *men*. Here we find an expressed belief in the Gospel of the authority of the Church to forgive sins.

As Jesus claims authority to forgive sins--without acknowledging the Father as the source of this authority--He implies that He Himself is the source of this authority. Here we may have two implied references to the divinity of Jesus Christ: One would be Jesus attributing this divine power to the Person of the Son of Man, and the other would be Matthew's attributing this power, within the Church, to a gift from God. As we have seen in the Fourth Gospel, it is the Risen Christ who bestows this power upon the Church. There we read:

*Then he breathed upon them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound.”* Jn. 20:22-23

### JESUS' RELATIONSHIP WITH SINNERS

Matthew continues to develop the theme of Jesus' attitude toward sinful people, and the depths to which His desire for a relationship with them can lead. Matthew uses His own call to discipleship as a prime example. As learned in the Introduction, Matthew's chosen profession as a publican or tax collector caused him to be, in the eyes of the Jews, a religious outcast. The Pharisees considered him an irreligious man and a social outcast. In their opinion, no one could associate with such people without becoming as impure and unacceptable to God as they were. Jesus ignores the social and religious customs and taboos in His relationship to sinful people, for they impede His divine commission. His behavior outrages and scandalizes the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus' reaction teaches us that it is not important, as far as salvation is concerned, what a person was before meeting Christ. What matters is the encounter with Christ and what follows. Jesus does not condone sin, but He does not reject any person because of sin. In the eyes of Jesus, every person is a prisoner of sin, enslaved by it, and doomed to receive its ultimate wages: eternal death. The coming of Christ into the world is the coming of the Lord

who grants amnesty to all prisoners who accept His lordship, and complete and absolute pardon of all crimes, be they one or a million. Those whose sins are forgiven through Christ truly experience a new birth. In the eyes of the Lord, what occurred before has ceased to be--no moral guilt remains.

However, this does not imply that past evil behavior has not left some damaging residue in the human character. This is another problem. Only the full effect of redemption restores all human things to perfection. This, however, must await the Day of the Lord when Christian bodies will rise gloriously from their graves. As Paul writes to the Romans: "... *we ourselves although we have the Spirit as first fruits, groan inwardly while we await the redemption of our bodies (Rm. 8:23).*"

Jesus meets Matthew in his sinful condition and calls him, amidst this condition, into discipleship, which implies an intimate friendship with Jesus Christ. By so doing, Jesus calls Matthew out of his sinful condition. To deliberately remain in sin would be an implied rejection of the salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ. Matthew relates:

*As he moved on, Jesus saw a man named Matthew at his post where taxes were collected. He said to him, "Follow me." Matthew got up and followed him. Mt. 9:9*

In this recorded incident, Matthew teaches that true conversion implies immediately leaving behind one's old life, and beginning a new life by following in the footsteps of Jesus. Amidst the joy of his conversion and to celebrate it, Matthew gives a banquet in honor of Jesus and invites his friends to meet his Lord. Matthew, of course, knows only sinners, since the "*good people*" have shunned him and have shut their doors and lives on him. And so we read:

*Now it happened that, while Jesus was at table in Matthew's home, many tax collectors and those known as sinners came to join Jesus and his disciples at dinner. Mt. 9:10*

It is Luke that tells us that Matthew "*gave a great reception for Jesus in his house (Lk. 5:29).*" Everyone in the culture of that time knew what Matthew's gesture, and Jesus' acceptance of it, implied. To dine with another was a sacred sign of friendship or reconciliation. By accepting this invitation, Jesus declared Himself open to receive all such people into



His personal friendship. Jesus' presence at the banquet is a call to repentance. His presence seeks to give sinners the courage "to come home" and to have faith in God's merciful love for them, even when they do not love God. The presence of Jesus at the banquet table of sinners is the sign of God's enduring love for sinners. In Jesus, God makes the first move toward sinners.

At this point, Matthew presents the second negative reaction to Jesus Christ. When Jesus demonstrated that He possessed the power to forgive the sins of men, He scandalized the scribes. By His intimate association with sinful people, He shocked the Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees clearly understood what these words and deeds of Jesus implied, and they were unwilling to accept what they implied about God. Their concept of religion, holiness, and God's relationship with mankind was rigid, and even God could not change it. The Torah had been an expression of the Will of God, but no law--not even a million laws--could adequately express that Will. The Will of God expresses the very Being and Nature of God that finds full expression only in the Person of God. The New Testament confirms: "*God is Love (I Jn. 4:16).*" Only acts of divine love reflect, in any true and essential way, the Will of God. His Will most perfectly expresses itself to us in Jesus Christ. God radically revolutionized religion, holiness, and salvation in Jesus Christ.

The scribes and Pharisees stood at the crossroads of religion, and Jesus Christ appeared as the *Signpost* to God. To go Jesus' Way demands walking a radical new way, a way so radical that it demands literally a death and a rebirth--a reentry into the humility of childhood. The scribes and Pharisees stood bitterly before the *Signpost* at the crossroads of religious history. The *Signpost* spoke to them: "*Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Mt. 16:25).*"

The Pharisees directed their implied criticism of Jesus to His disciples. Matthew relates: "*The Pharisees saw this and complained to his disciples, 'What reason can the Teacher have for eating with tax collectors and those who disregard the law (Mt. 9:11)?'*" Jesus overheard this criticism. He responded, seeking to aid them in seeing God as Savior, and to understand that this saving-God Wills the salvation of all, and not only of pious people called "*Pharisees.*"

*People who are in good health do not need a doctor; sick people do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice.' I have come to call, not the self-righteous, but sinners.*

*Mt. 9:12-13*

Jesus sought to broaden their concept of the God of Israel, and to enlarge their hearts, in order for them to accept a God of merciful love--the God who proclaimed through the prophet Ezekiel:

*Do I indeed derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked? says the Lord God. Do I not rather rejoice when he turns from his evil way that he may live? ... For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, says the Lord God. Return and live!*

*Ez. 18:23, 32*

If these men constrict their hearts any more, they will destroy God in their hearts. Through the prophet Hosea, the Lord once said: "*For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge rather than holocausts (Hos. 6:6).*"

#### A NEW WINE

When Jesus speaks of not coming to call the "righteous," He does not exclude from His mission of salvation such pious people as Simeon and Anna, who faithfully adhere to the Mosaic Law. All such people--as did Mary--"*rejoice in God my savior.*" Rather, Jesus speaks of those men and women who declare *themselves* "righteous" and "saved." In a word, these people are "self-righteous." Righteousness in the Scriptures is a legal term. It is a state declared to be by a judge. In the matter of *moral* righteousness, only God judges who has righteousness. One may have hope and confidence in this world of one day being declared righteous, but most people must wait until Judgment Day to know for certain. No human being possesses righteousness until the Judge declares it so. Paul states the proper attitude towards righteousness when he writes to the Corinthians:

*It matters little to me whether you or any human court pass judgment on me. I do not even pass judgment on myself. Mind you, I have nothing on my conscience. But that does not mean that I am declaring myself innocent. The Lord is the one to judge*

*me, so stop passing judgment before the time of his return. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and manifest the intentions of hearts.*  
I Cor. 4:3-5

People who look upon themselves as righteous and saved are the "self-righteous" who have usurped the role of the Divine Judge. In their eyes, no one can convict such people of sin--not even God. They do not come to repentance for they see no need for it. They impede their own salvation. Jesus says He has not "*come to call*" such people.

At this point Matthew inserts an incident which illustrates how revolutionary the spirit of Jesus is--how it demands a new religious form for its adequate expression. Once again there is criticism of Jesus and His disciples. This time it comes from a different direction--from the disciples of John the Baptist, who make it clear that they are not disciples of Jesus Christ. At this point we need to bear in mind the religious position of John the Baptist as the last Old Testament prophet. John heralded the New Testament while remaining within the Old. His mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah. He preached a baptism and taught an ascetic way of life, to prepare people to accept the revelation of God's Will in Christ. It was one thing to follow John, but another thing to reject Jesus out of allegiance to John. Matthew relates: "*Later on, John's disciples came to him with the objection: 'Why is it that we and the Pharisees fast, your disciples do not (Mt. 9:14)?'*"

Jesus seeks to teach John's disciples that their discipleship is not an end in itself, but a means. He uses their criticism to point out that the men they criticize have become disciples of the One John foretold would come after him--the Christ. Jesus pictures Himself and His disciples as a bridegroom present with his friends. Such an occasion is not a time for fasting but for joy. Jesus teaches that a day will come when the bridegroom will depart, then His disciples will fast. However they will not fast in the same manner as the disciples of John, or those of the Pharisees. When His disciples fast they "*are not to look glum as the hypocrites do,*" but they are to appear as if they didn't fast--in a festive manner. To the disciples of John, Jesus responds:

*How can wedding guests go in mourning as long as the groom is with them. When the day comes that the groom is taken away, then they will fast.* *Mt. 9:15*

With two homey examples, Jesus teaches the disciples of John that they cannot remain John's disciples and still participate in the reign of God which comes within Jesus Christ. They cannot cling to the old and still inherit the new. Jesus tells them:

*Nobody sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; the very thing he has used to cover the hole will pull, and the rip only gets worse. People do not pour new wine into old wineskins; if they do, the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and in that way both are preserved.* *Mt. 9:16-17*

Jesus brings a new spirit to religion which is incompatible with the spirit that existed before. Trying to combine the two will only have disastrous results. Jesus teaches that no one can be His disciple unless he deny his very self. *"None of you can be my disciples if he does not renounce all his possessions (Lk. 14:33)."* "All his possessions" includes what is spiritual as well as material. One must be willing to leave behind his own particular form of holiness, his own ideas and practices of holiness, and be willing to be formed anew by the Spirit of Christ in the Image of Christ. For these disciples, it meant leaving John for Jesus.

When the Church seeks to institutionalize the Spirit of Christ—to confine it within historical, ethical, and cultural limits--the effect is disastrous for the Church. The Spirit of Christ constantly calls the Church to change--to bring that change which is demanded by growth and maturity--the maturity described in Scripture as *"that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature (Eph. 4:13)."* Who can limit a Church called to be the fullness of Christ? It calls for growth in both quantity and quality. Paul speaks of a Church that is in continuous growth--rising upon *"the foundations of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20),"* and *"being built into this temple, to become a dwelling place for God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:22)."*

At this point the Galilean ministry of Jesus enjoys a limited success. The words and deeds of Jesus impress the general public; certain people have attached themselves to Him as His disciples. However, there exists a

subtle undercurrent of opposition towards Jesus among certain Jewish parties. This opposition has surfaced within three groups. The first group consists of the lawyers, who realize that Jesus has made an implicit affirmation to possessing divine power, which--they rightly deduce--may mean He sees Himself as Divine. Despite the evidence offered by Jesus to support His position, they judge His implications to be blasphemous.

The Pharisees are the second group to oppose Jesus. Their opposition centers upon Jesus' violating their accepted code of religious morality. The members of this party have made themselves--at great personal sacrifice--"the separated ones," in order to be that holy remnant of Israel that remains pure and acceptable to God. In their eyes, Jesus' association with social outcasts and public sinners renders Him as unholy as they are. He could not be a "man of God," but rather a false prophet.

John's disciples are the third group. They are suspicious of Jesus and of His disciples, because they do not display the recognizable signs of traditional Jewish piety. They subtly imply that their holiness surpasses that of the disciples of Jesus, and probably imply that John's holiness surpasses the holiness of Jesus. No one would deny that John and Jesus expressed holiness in different ways. Jesus was the first to acknowledge that when *"John appeared neither eating nor drinking ... the Son of Man appeared eating and drinking... (Mt. 11:18-19)."*

We see here the beginning of the polarization of the Jewish people over Jesus Christ: a small percentage of the people are committed to Jesus, a large percentage are well disposed but not committed to Him, the powerful political party of the Pharisees with their scribes are alienated from Christ, and the disciples of John appear to be in a state of limbo.

The disciples are beginning to feel the cost of discipleship--of being associated with Jesus. Not only must they associate on an intimate level with "undesirable" people such as tax collectors, but they must bear criticism from some of the most respected and esteemed people in Jewish society. There is no doubt that their own process of purification has begun with their motives for discipleship being questioned to some degree. However, at this point they are probably more in a defensive rather than reflective mood--they are defending themselves and their Leader.

## DESPARATE CASES

Matthew returns to the narration of miraculous deeds performed by Jesus, through which the secrets of God's reign unfold, and the disciples find instruction. He presents two desperate cases coming to Jesus: the head of the synagogue, and a woman sick for twelve years. We read:

*Before Jesus had finished speaking to them, a synagogue leader came up, did him reverence, and said: "My daughter has just died. Please come and lay your hand on her and she will come back to life." Jesus stood up and followed him, and his disciples did the same. As they were going, a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the tassel on his cloak. "If only I can touch his cloak," she thought, "I shall get well." Jesus turned around and saw her and said, "Courage, daughter! Your faith has restored you to health." That very moment the woman got well. When Jesus arrived at the synagogue leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd who were making a din, he said, "Leave, all of you! The little girl is not dead. She is asleep." At this they began to ridicule him. When the crowd had been put out he entered and took her by the hand, and the little girl got up. News of this circulated throughout the district.*

*Mt. 9:18-26*

From another account, we know that the man is called "Jairus." He is the *hazan*, the head of the Jewish synagogue. Matthew has already made it clear that these synagogues are "*their synagogues*"--Jesus and His disciples are not part of these worshipping communities. At this point in the narrative, they are still welcomed in "*their synagogues*," but Matthew writes in a later period that when Jesus had been officially rejected, "*they began to ridicule him*" in the synagogues, and excommunicate His disciples. Perhaps Matthew realized that Jesus had never been accepted in the synagogue, only tolerated for awhile.

Obviously, such a man as Jairus would not have come to Jesus but as a last resort. He had tried other means but nothing prevailed. His daughter died; no one had been able to keep her alive. However reluctant he may be, he comes in faith. His coming indicates he knows Jesus possesses the power to give life to the dead. He implies the divinity of Jesus when he says: "*Please come and lay your hand on her and she will come back to life.*"

Jesus speaks of the little girl as being "asleep." However, we know from the words used and the presence of the professional mourners and flute players that the girl is physically dead. The early Church uses the word "asleep" for physical death. It expresses the conviction that, for those who believe in Jesus, physical death is not the death of the person, but only the "sleep" of the body. This miracle demonstrates Jesus' power over death: He is the resurrection and the life! All the faithful who are now "asleep" will rise from the dead.

In this miracle, we have a symbol of Christian Baptism. The dead girl represents the human spirit, dead to eternal life because of sin. Jesus is the life-giving spirit who brings new birth and newness of life. We see in this case that personal faith in Jesus is impossible; it is the faith of the father--the head of the household--that supplies the faith for the girl.

This miraculous incident may also symbolize the ultimate conversion of the Jews. Jairus--the head of the synagogue--represents the nation, and the dead girl its spiritual state. The conversion of Israel comes with the realization that only faith in Jesus can bring new life to Israel. Paul writes of Israel:

*I ask then, has God rejected his people? Of course not! ... Does their stumbling mean they are forever fallen? Not at all ... If their rejection has meant reconciliation for the world, what will their acceptance mean? Nothing less than life from the dead! They were cut off because of unbelief ... And if the Jews do not remain in their unbelief--they will be grafted back on, for God is able to do this ... blindness has come upon part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles enter in, and then all Israel will be saved.*

*Rm. 11:1-26*

Perhaps Matthew has symbolically presented this truth in the episode with Jairus, which reveals the ultimate power of Jesus to save even those who reject Him. In the woman's case, we are told that her sickness had lasted twelve years. Such an affliction made her ritually impure, and a source of contamination for others. She lived in pain and loneliness. The consolations of religious worship and social life were denied to her because of her affliction. From other scriptural sources, we know she had been reduced to poverty. All her resources had been spent vainly in search of health and happiness. She came to Jesus in final desperation.

Pious Jews wore an outer garment, similar to a cloak that went over their tunic and was tied with a girdle or belt. On the four corners of this garment hung multi-colored tassels. The Torah prescribed these decorations. They symbolized the Torah and were to be worn as a remembrance "*to keep all the commandments of the Lord, without going wantonly astray after the desires of your hearts and eyes (Num. 15:39).*" The desire of this woman to touch the tassels of the garment may symbolize her repentant spirit and her firm resolution to commit herself to the Law of God, which could be possible only if she was cured. Her coming to Jesus in faith may have symbolized her intention to become His disciple--to follow the commandments of God as taught by Jesus.

This woman certainly symbolizes many people in the world who truly are ill in body and soul--void of health and happiness--and have squandered their resources in search of life. In their poverty and sickness, they now discover themselves completely alienated from man and God. From this incident, we see that even if society rejects them, regardless of the years squandered, if they come to Jesus in faith they will hear: "*Courage daughter! Your faith has restored you to health (Mt. 9:22).*" We see that true healing followed upon the woman turning her whole self towards God. Without faith in Christ, the miracle would truly have been meaningless. (Christian Tradition has romantically identified the woman in this miracle to be Veronica--the woman who wiped the suffering face of Jesus.)

### MEANING OF MIRACLES

Matthew records an incident in which two blind men are cured.

*As Jesus moved on from there, two blind men came after him crying out, "Son of David, have pity on us!" When he got to the house, the blind men caught up with him. Jesus said to them, "Are you confident I can do this?" "Yes, Lord," they told him. At that he touched their eyes and said, "Because of your faith it shall be done to you;" and they recovered their sight. Then Jesus warned them sternly, "See to it that no one knows of this." But they went off and spread word of him through the whole area.*

*Mt. 9:27-31*

In this incident, people come to Jesus with an inadequate faith in Him--symbolized in the title "Son of David." Jesus ignores their petition: He does



not wish to identify with such a title. It speaks too much of a political messiah and too little of Jesus' true identity. The blind men must continue to follow Jesus: they must go from seeing Jesus as the "Son of David" to confessing him to be "Lord." The blind men finally come to Jesus in His home, and He questions their faith. They are healed when they profess an adequate faith in Jesus to give light to their eyes.

In this healing, faith does not cause the miracle--Jesus does. However, we see that proper faith is an indispensable condition for the miracle. We have already seen that faith does not have to be present in the recipient of the miracle or the healing, but it must be present in the petitioner. People can come to Jesus in any condition and be received--except when they come without proper faith.

Matthew closes this series of ten miracles with the healing of a deaf man:

*As they were leaving, suddenly some people brought him a mute who was possessed by a demon. Once the demon was expelled the mute began to speak, to the great surprise of the crowds.*

*Mt. 9:32-33*

The afflicted man is described as *kophos*, which implies that he is deaf, and this man is deaf because he is possessed. He probably symbolizes many in Israel who cannot hear the Word of God in Jesus because evil has deafened them.

The listing of the ten miracles symbolizes through the number ten the unlimited healing power possessed by Jesus. Through the cases of those who come to Jesus and find salvation, Matthew teaches the extent of God's merciful love. There are no limits to God's love; only human beings can limit God's love for them. This whole section, no doubt, finds its inspiration in Chapter 35 of Isaiah, where the prophet foretells the deliverance that Matthew has described.

The ten miracles have revealed the Lord's compassionate love and concern for all people; they demonstrate that Jesus comes in the true Spirit of God. The Scriptures clearly confirm this. This section concludes with the reactions of the people; it sadly reveals the final polarization caused by the words and deeds of Jesus:

*The crowds were amazed and said, "Nothing like this has been seen in Israel!" But the Pharisees were saying, "He casts out demons through the prince of demons."* Mt. 9:33-34

They listen to their scribes and conclude miraculous powers cannot be denied, but what this power implies cannot be accepted. They opt to sin against the Light, not only by denying the truth, but, much more importantly, by labeling it "darkness," they sin against the Holy Spirit. The storm is gathering, and Jesus reads the signs...

Despite opposition and rejection, Jesus goes on:

*Jesus continued his tour of all the towns and villages. He taught in their synagogues, he proclaimed the good news of God's reign, and he cured every sickness and disease.* Mt. 9:35

Matthew tells us why Jesus must go:

*At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd.* Mt. 9:36

Matthew tells us why Jesus invites men and women to join with Him in His mission:

*He said to his disciples: "The harvest is good but laborers are scarce. Beg the harvest master to send out laborers to gather his harvest."* Mt. 9:38

## CHAPTER 11

### APOSTOLIC SPIRIT

#### INTRODUCTION

The teachings of Jesus reveal the Compassion of God. Jesus urges his disciples, "*Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate (Lk. 6:36).*" The Sacred Scriptures present God as One moved by the sufferings of people--as One who feels their pain. Jesus presents God as a Father "*who knows how to give good gifts to his children (Lk. 11:13);*" who has "*no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies (Ek. 18:32);*" who Wills that "*his sun rises on the bad and the good, he rains on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45).*" The Evangelist John speaks of this compassionate God when he writes: "*Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... that the world might be saved through him (Jn. 3:16,17).*" Only the Compassion of God offers a satisfactory explanation for the Word being made Flesh--for the Incarnation of God's Son. God--in Jesus--moved into the human situation and suffered--in Jesus--the fullness of human pain unto death itself. This is not the God presented by the philosophers: aloof, coldly isolated, and unmoved by all those outside the Divine Nature. A God revealed by reason is not the God revealed by Jesus Christ.

Divine compassion explains the life and mission of Jesus. Compassion motivated His life on earth. It is the key which unlocks its mystery. This spirit of compassion closely identifies Jesus with the Heavenly Father. In his gospel account, Mark tells us: "*Upon disembarking Jesus saw a vast crowd. He pitied them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them at great length (Mk. 6:34).*" Matthew clarifies the true condition of sheep without a shepherd: "*At the sight of the crowd, his heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd (Mt. 9:36).*" Such sheep are helpless creatures. They appear almost to lack the instinct for self-survival. Predators prey upon them; dogs run them to death for the sheer pleasure of the chase; ignorance and folly direct their behavior. Matthew tells us that Jesus gazed upon a vast crowd and their sad condition moved Him to pity. The word translated *crowd* probably referred to the *people of the land*. These

were the poor and ignorant of Israel, who neither understood nor observed the Torah, nor the prescribed traditions of the ancients; they could ill afford to live in such a fashion. They were despised and held in contempt by the scribes and the Pharisees. The Pharisees claimed that these were the only people who accepted Jesus. They expressed their contempt for these followers of Christ in their critical words to the temple guards: *"Only this lot (accepts Jesus), that knows nothing about the law--and they are lost anyway (Jn. 7:49)."* They had contempt for these "lost" people. Their attitude implied that they would not lift a finger to save them or aid in their salvation. They were not "worthy" to be saved. Their spirit was completely the opposite of that of Jesus, and of the spirit Jesus demanded of His disciples.

The physical and spiritual condition of these people moved Jesus to pity and mercy--compassion. He saw them *"lying prostrate from exhaustion."* A more literal translation reads: *"they were distressed and physically devastated."* The Greek word translated *distressed (eskulmenoi)* has a wide range of meaning, being *flayed alive, to troubled, bewildered,* "despondent. The word translated *prostrate or devastated" (eppimmenoi)* carries in the Greek the connotation of a human being rendered *helpless, dejected, put down* because of drunkenness or a mortal wound. These words project the tragic picture of people overcome by the problems and burdens of life. They are down and out and unable to get back upon their feet. Their lives have lost all sense of direction and they are morally and physically dejected. They wander aimlessly from bad to worse, daily sinking deeper into bewilderment and despair--poor sheep without a shepherd. Such should not be the state of God's people.

Let us recall the prayer of Moses to Yahweh:

*Then Moses said to the Lord, "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, set over the community a man who shall act as their leader in all things, to guide them in all their actions; that the Lord's community may not be like sheep without a shepherd."*

*Num. 27:15-17*

God provided shepherds for His people. It was the shepherds who failed them--not God. The prophet Ezekiel recorded this lament and promise of Yahweh:

*Thus the word of the Lord came to me: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves! ... but the sheep you have not pastured. You did not strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. You did not bring back the strayed nor seek the lost, but you lorded it over them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered and wandered over all the mountains and high hills; my sheep were scattered over the whole earth, with no one to look after them or to search for them ... Thus says the Lord God: I swear I am coming against these shepherds. I will claim my sheep from them and put a stop to their shepherding my sheep so that they may no longer pasture themselves. I will save my sheep that they may no longer be food for their mouths. For thus says the Lord God: I myself will look after and tend my sheep ... I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord God. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal ... shepherding them rightly .. I will appoint one shepherd over them to pasture them, my servant David; he shall pasture them and be their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I, the Lord, have spoken.*

*Ez. 34:1-6,10-11,15-16,24*

The finger of accusation rests upon the scribes and the Pharisees, and Jesus insinuates that the present blame for this condition lies with the religious leaders who assumed the position of Moses in Israel. Jesus tells the people:

*...teachers; therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you. But do not follow their example. Their words are bold but their deeds are few.*

*Mt. 23:2-3*

A more literal translation speaks of the scribes and Pharisees as sitting upon the chair (cathedras) of Moses. This implies they possess legitimate authority in Israel. Since they possess the authority over the people, they assume the responsibility for the people. They are responsible for the people "lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus recognizes His vocation to fulfill the prophecy of Ezekiel and be the good shepherd "to the crowds without a shepherd."

Within this same text, Matthew tells us that, as Jesus spoke of this lamentable condition, He immediately said to His disciples: "*The harvest is good but laborers are scarce (Mt. 9:37).*" Jesus saw these poor people as a harvest to be gathered into the kingdom of heaven. Apparently the labors involved in being the good shepherd could not be accomplished by one solitary person--even if the person is Jesus Christ. Jesus made His disciples part of the solution to His problem. First, He encouraged them to open their eyes to see and recognize the problem: these vast crowds were fields to be labored within for the salvation of people. Jesus observed that the harvest was ready to be gathered but that there was a scarcity of workers. Laborers are so few. "*The harvest is good but laborers are scarce (Mt. 9:37).*" "*The harvest is rich but the workers are few (Lk. 10:2).*" In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus speaks of the gathering of this harvest as God's Will and the accomplishment of this Will as the very food of his soul:

*Doing the will of him who sent me and bringing his work to completion is my food. Do you not have a saying, "Four months more and it will be harvest!"? Listen to what I say: Open your eyes and see! The fields are shining for harvest! Jn. 4:34-35*

A harvest neglected within the field may soon rot and be lost.

"*The workers are few*" because people are reluctant to undertake such a task--to get involved in such an exhausting ministry. It demands more than the ordinary love of God and man. How well Jesus experienced this to be true! Therefore, the second thing Jesus urges His disciples to do is pray--pray to the *chief harvester*. In the Aramaic language, this would be the *rab Hesada*--the person responsible for hiring and dismissing harvest workers. Jesus tells them: "*Beg the harvest master to send out laborers to gather his harvest (Mt. 9:38).*"

## HARVEST IN THE FIELD

This Gospel truly exposes the heart of Jesus. It reveals how sensitive Jesus is to the poor, the neglected, and the abandoned people of this world. No one could truly ever know His heart's concern, and confess to love Jesus, yet still ignore the work of salvation. Such a concern drove Francis Xavier to India and Mother Teresa into the streets of Calcutta. This spirit of Jesus motivated all the great Christian missionaries and mission enterprises within the Church. Father Judge spoke of this particular spirit of Jesus as

*“a rare spirit,” “a priceless spirit ... a spirit high above that of those who are ordinarily devout. It is a spirit so ardent, so interior, so exhaustive of self that those weak in virtue, or enslaved by attachment, think of it with dread.”* In 1927, after seeing vast numbers of spiritually neglected people in Puerto Rico, Father Judge wrote to the members of the Cenacle in that area:

*I never realized as much as I do when I visit those poor, neglected people the catastrophe of the idle hours of our life. Idle hours! What these would mean for the Church and religion if put to a purpose that would bring peace of mind and help to our neighbor! I tell you my dear children, thousands and thousands of the souls of our little brothers and sisters are going to be lost to God because we have not sacrificed enough. As for myself, I wish that I might have many lives to give unto these little ones. These people cannot help themselves. There is no reason for us to envy the saints or apostles, for those opportunities are right here today. If we do not take the higher place in heaven, and if many souls are going to be lost, it is because some of us have reason to be disquieted and to beat our breasts in sorrow at those words of our Divine Lord, “He who taketh not up his cross, and followeth me, is not worthy of me.”*

*Mt. 10:38*

## CALL OF THE APOSTLES

As Jesus directed, the disciples prayed. The *rab hesada*—the harvest master heard their prayer. He made them the answer to their prayer: He called them to be apostles of Jesus Christ. We also know that Jesus, too, prayed. Luke records: *“Then he went out to the mountain to pray, spending the night in communion with God (Lk. 6:12).”* What then occurred resulted from a night of prayer: Jesus selected twelve of His disciples—*“he had chosen through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2)”*--to be His apostles. Matthew writes:

*Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority to expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and disease of every kind. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first Simon, now known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James, Zebedee’s son, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and*

*Matthew the tax collector; James, son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot Party member, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.* Mt. 10:1-4

We are told: "*Jesus sent these men on mission as the Twelve after instructing them... (Mt. 10:5).*"

Matthew informs us that Jesus selected twelve of His disciples to be "*apostles*" to whom He gave authority and sent "*on mission as the Twelve.*" He already informed his readers that Jesus possessed authority: Jesus "*taught with authority and not like the scribes (Mt. 7:29).*" The centurion recognized Jesus to be a man possessing a unique authority on earth. The paralyzed man was cured to help the Pharisees "*realize that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (Mt. 9:6).*" By curing diseases, casting out demons, calming the stormy sea, with a word or gesture, Jesus demonstrated that He was a person possessing extraordinary authority over illness, affliction and evil spirits. Jesus not only possessed authority but the power to impart this authority to others: "*He gave them authority to expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and disease of every kind (Mt. 10:1).*" Luke relates that the disciples jubilantly returned to Jesus saying, "*Master, even the demons are subject to us in your name (Lk. 10:17).*"

In the Greek language, the word *apostles* comes from *apostolos* which is derived from the verb *apostellein* meaning *to send*. The term is not frequently used in Greek; where used, it refers to the send-off of a fleet or army on an expedition, or a colony of people to settle a land. Essentially, it carries the connotation of people being sent on a mission by one in authority to do so. The word *apostolos* appears in the Septuagint Bible--a Greek version of the Old Testament--in I Kgs.14:6 where the prophet Abijah tells the wife of Jeroboam that he has *been commissioned* by Yahweh to give her a message. Within this text, *apostolos* is used to translate the Hebrew word *saluah* derived from the root *sih* meaning *send*--it signifies a person sent by God with a message.

In the Aramaic language, a *saliah* (or its plural *seluhim*) would signify a *commissioned emissary*. We most probably find the root of the concept *apostles*, as used in the New Testament, in an understanding of the Aramaic concept of *saliah* and its Hebrew equivalent *shaluah*. At this time within Jewish history, a legal institution called the *sheluhim* existed among the Jews: people in authority sent out commissioned rabbis as their representatives with



their full authority to accomplish a particular task. Usually the *sheluhim* would be sent to collect the temple tax or conduct some business deal. However, they were at times sent with religious authority to act in certain matters and give authoritative teachings. Within their commission, these *sheluhim* possessed the full power of their sender. The sender acted in and through his *sheluhim*. The *sheluhim* were official ambassadors. The sender was personally concerned with the reception his delegation would receive. We know that for one ruler to insult the ambassadors of another ruler was considered an affront to that ruler and his nation.

Jesus saw Himself as the *shaluah* (apostle) of the Father in heaven and the Twelve Apostles as being His *sheluhim*. He made no distinction between His reception and people's reception of God; nor did He make any distinction between the reception given to His disciples and to Himself. The author of Hebrews referred to Jesus as "*the apostle*" (Heb. 3:1). The Fourth Gospel spoke of the Father sending "*the Son into the world* (Jn. 3:17)." Jesus declared: "*And whoever looks on me is seeing him who sent me* (Jn. 12:45)." He also said:

*Whoever welcomes me welcomes him who sent me.* Lk. 9:48

*... and he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me.* Lk. 10:16

*I solemnly assure you, he who accepts anyone I send accepts me, and in accepting me accepts him who sent me.* Jn. 13:20

*He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects me...*  
Lk. 10:16

In prayer to His Father, Jesus revealed: "*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world* (Jn. 17:18)."

When the Risen Savior appeared to the Eleven remaining apostles, He said: "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you* (Jn. 20:21)."

Paul saw the apostles as being the "*sheluhim*" of both Christ and God. He said to the Corinthians that God—"has given us the ministry of reconciliation ... he has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. This makes us ambassadors for Christ, God as it were appealing through us (2Cor. 5:18-20)."

These Twelve Apostles played a vital role in the mission of Christ and within the foundation of His Church. They became the official witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and the authentic teachers of His doctrine. We know from Acts that they were men who had been in the company of the Lord Jesus from "*the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us into heaven (Acts 1:21-22).*" The Twelve were selected under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and fully commissioned and empowered by the Risen Jesus Christ to be His Apostles. The number "12" itself has been seen as a symbol of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Twelve Apostles represented the foundation of the New Israel, which was to be composed of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul spoke of the Apostles as the foundation upon which the Church--the Body of Christ--rises (see Eph. 2:20). The Book of Revelation, speaking of the New Jerusalem, tells us: "*The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Rev. 21:14).*" With the replacement of Judas by Matthias, we see that the number "12" had special significance. The one elected to replace Judas in the company of the Twelve had to be a disciple from the time of John the Baptist until Jesus' Ascension into heaven. As Acts implies, it was an office to be filled: "*May another take his office (Acts 1:20).*" However, it was not an office to be filled upon the death of the Apostles. When James was beheaded, no one was selected to replace him.

We have four listings of the Apostles in the New Testament. In all four of these, Simon Peter heads the list even though, according to the Fourth Gospel account, he was not the first called to discipleship. On all four lists, Judas Iscariot appears last. The names of the Apostles appear in three groups of four. The same names appear in all three groups, but not necessarily in the same order (with the exception of Peter and Judas). A problem exists concerning the names of the Twelve Apostles: Matthew and Mark mention *Thaddeus* as an Apostle. His name is not found in the listing in Luke and Acts, instead we read *Jude*--the simplest solution to the problem being that the Apostle was known by two names: Thaddeus and Jude. He may have been referred to as *Thaddeus* in Matthew and Mark to distinguish him from Judas the traitor. He is referred to today in the Church as Jude Thaddeus. One of the Apostles--Simon--is called a *Zealot*, which probably meant he belonged to the radical political party known by that name. Josephus says that this party was founded by Judas the Galilean. He tells us:

*These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their ruler and Lord. They also do not value dying, any kinds of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man lord.*

It is generally held that all the Apostles, with the exception of Judas, were Galileans. The name *Iscariot* has been interpreted to mean *the man from Kerioth* which was a place in Southern Judea. However, some have insisted that *Iscariot* was a nickname that made reference to the fact that Judas had reddish hair.

### INSTRUCTIONS TO THE APOSTLES

Matthew makes clear the Twelve received limited authority at this time from Jesus. He mentions the limits to that authority: “... *to expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and disease of every kind (Mt. 10.1).*” These were signs of the coming of God’s reign. At this time, they do not receive explicit authority either to forgive sins or to teach. This authority comes only after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew makes a point of Jesus sending out only enlightened disciples. Power, unless directed by knowledge, can produce chaos. Goodwill, without the guidance of truth and understanding, may cause more harm than good. Let us recall the story of the sympathetic monkey who rescued the fish from drowning by carrying him into the safety of the tree. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus only sent “*these men on mission as the Twelve, after giving them the following instructions (Mt. 10:5).*”

Many recognize the following instructions as a compilation of Jesus’ missionary instructions to the apostles and disciples who would later be sent out on missionary activities. These instructions applied especially to those who would have an itinerant ministry; they especially applied to the Twelve who, like Jesus, “*toured all of Galilee.*” Some of them applied only for the time Jesus remained on earth and others were general instructions, applicable to many times and places.

First, we see that Jesus restricted the mission of the Twelve: “*Do not visit pagan territory and do not enter a Samaritan town. Go instead after the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 10:5-6).*” We can discover several good reasons for this prudent advice, the first one being that they were sent to

where Jesus planned to come. He later stated: "*My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 15:24).*" From this we understand the personal mission of Jesus to be limited--due no doubt to the limited time men allotted Him on earth. God Willed first to call Israel into the reign of God through belief and submission to Christ--the conversion of Israel being part of the *ideal* divine plan for the conversion and salvation of the world. God desired the nation of Israel to take the gospel message into the entire world. This commission fell only to a few Jews and to the Gentiles, when Israel rejected the Messiah. Jesus told the Samaritan woman: "*After all, salvation is from the Jews (Jn. 4:22).*" The Gospel must first be proclaimed to Israel. The necessity of completing this task before the death of Jesus called for restrictions upon the mission of the Twelve.

There were other practical reasons for this restriction. The Apostles were not prepared at this time to meet with the evil entrenched within the pagan world. Relatively speaking, Israel was a safe environment in which to work as a missionary--unless one claimed to be the Son of God. Only after the coming of the Holy Spirit would the disciples possess the full "*armor of God.*" Once out in the pagan field, the Church realized: "*Our battle is not against human forces but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above (Eph. 6:12).*" An apostle must have the spiritual insight to recognize the enemy and know that spiritual weapons must be used against spiritual forces.

We may also safely presume that the Apostles had not yet developed a spirit catholic enough, and a love unconditional enough, to deal sensitively and prudently with the problems involved in converting pagans and Samaritans.

The Evangelist John presented a superb example of missionary technique when he recorded the incident of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. This encounter ended with the woman becoming an evangelist within the town: "*Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did! Could this not be the Messiah (Jn. 4:29)?*" The town's people later confessed: "*We have heard for ourselves and we know that this really is the Savior of the world (Jn. 4:42).*" As a contrast to this incident, we have the example of the spiritual immaturity of two apostles, as described by Luke. We read:

*As the time approached when he was to be taken from this world, he firmly resolved to proceed toward Jerusalem, and sent messengers on ahead of him. These entered a Samaritan town to*

*prepare for his passing through, but the Samaritans would not welcome him because he was on his way to Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, would you not have us call down fire from heaven to destroy them?" He turned toward them only to reprimand them. Then they set off for another town.* Luke 9:51-56

James and John did not know of what spirit they were. To have sent the Twelve prematurely into pagan or Samaritan territory could have set back, for a considerable time, the coming of God's reign among them.

Jesus does commission the Twelve to herald the kingdom of God. He makes them heralds of good news: "As you go, make this announcement: 'The reign of God is at hand (Mt. 10:7)!'" Apparently, this proclamation consists of both words and deeds. Jesus immediately tells the Twelve: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous, expel demons (Mt. 10:8)." There is a relationship between the coming of God's reign and the expulsion of demons, and the healing of the sick and the afflicted. Such a commission certainly symbolically expresses the future power of the Twelve--the power to forgive sins and impart the life-giving spirit of Jesus Christ to people dead in their sins. We have no record of the Apostles working such miracles prior to the resurrection of Jesus. Later, Peter is credited with restoring life to the widow Dorcas. We have a rather amusing incident in which Paul restored life to the young boy Eutychus; Acts records the time Paul gave a long sermon in Troas:

*Paul talked on and on, and a certain young lad named Eutychus who was sitting on the window-sill became drowsier and drowsier. He finally went sound asleep, and fell from the third story to the ground. When they picked him up he was dead.* Acts 20:9

It is recorded that Paul interrupted his talk long enough to restore the boy to life and "... then he talked for a long while--until his departure at dawn."

## THE GROUND RULES

Our Lord makes clear that these extraordinary powers given to the Apostles are gifts from God--gifts intended to establish the reign of God and build up the People of God. These gifts must never be bartered for material gains. He tells them: "The gift you have received, give as a gift (Mt. 10:8)."

Freely they have received and freely they must give. We find this truth dramatically illustrated in the encounter between Simon Peter and Simon the Magician. We read in Acts:

*Simon observed that it was through the laying on of hands that the apostles conferred the Spirit, and he made them an offer of money with the request, "Give me that power too, so that if I place my hands on anyone -he will receive the Holy Spirit." Peter said in answer: "May you and your money rot--thinking that God's gift can be bought!"*

*Acts 8:18*

Literally speaking, Peter told Simon to take his money and go to Hell! Peter declared Simon's offer evil--his intention sinful! This Simon had the rare but questionable fame of having a sin named after him--simony; the sin of simony being the expressed will to buy or sell those holy gifts and powers given to the Church for the supernatural welfare of people--such as the sacraments, offices of ministry, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit..

As Jesus sends the disciples into their first field experience without Him, He lays down certain stringent ground rules to be followed. By doing so, Jesus emphasizes the proper means and methods to complete their mission for Him. They are to be detached from material goods and have no dependence upon them. Their light wardrobe is designed for fast travel. They must realize that there can be no dependence upon material goods to accomplish a spiritual mission. For the accomplishment of their task, they must have complete reliance upon the gifts of God. As for their physical needs--these they must leave to the providential care of God. Jesus' teaching implies that those who receive spiritual blessings from the apostles will give them, in return, the physical and material support they may need. We now read His instructions:

*Provide yourself with neither gold nor silver nor copper in your belts; no traveling bag, no change of shirt, no sandals, and no walking staff. The workman after all, is worth his keep. Look for a worthy person in every town or village you come to and stay with him until you leave. As you enter his home bless it. If the home is deserving, your blessing will descend on it. If it is not, your blessing will return to you. If anyone does not receive you or listen to what you have to say, leave that house or town, and once outside it shake its dust from your feet. I assure you, it will go easier for the region*

*of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than it will for that town.*

*Mt. 10:9-15*

As Jesus sends out the Twelve, they are stripped down to mere physical necessities. Neither they nor the people must be mistaken about the gifts they bring. These truths are well illustrated in an episode from the life of Peter and John recorded in the Acts. We are told that Peter and John were going to the Temple to pray when a crippled beggar spied them and requested alms:

*“Look at us!” Peter said. The cripple gave them his whole attention, hoping to get something. Then Peter said: “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you! In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean walk!”*

*Acts 3:4-6*

We know the beggar would have been pleased and satisfied with silver or gold. However, the Apostles had something more precious to give him--something only God could give. They are to bring salvation into the world; Jesus desired to keep this point ever before their eyes--for the sake of the world.

As for what they will wear and eat, the Lord urges the Apostles not to be anxious about these matters. He implies they can expect support and assistance from those they serve. Luke records Jesus as telling them: *“Stay in the one house eating and drinking what they have, for the laborer is worth his wage ... eat what they set before you (Lk. 10:7-8).”* Later we see that the most famous of all itinerant missionaries--Paul of Tarsus--boasted that he received no material recompense for preaching the gospel, but still he defended his right to do so. Paul writes to the Corinthians:

*My defense against those who criticize me is this: Do we not have the right to eat and drink ... Is it only myself and Barnabas who are forced to work for a living? What soldier in the field pays for his rations? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its yield? ... If we have sown for you in the spirit, is it too much to expect a material harvest from you? ... Do you not realize that those who work in the temple are supported by the temple, and those who minister at the altar share the offerings of the altar? Likewise the Lord himself ordered that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel.*

*I Cor. 9:3-4,6,11,13-14*

There is a work written around the end of the first century called the *Didache*—*The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*--that expresses well the spirit that existed within the early Church. The *Didache* refers to those Christians who seek to make a living off Christ as *Christmongers*—*traders in Christ*--and warns: “*Be on your guard against such people.*” Concerning itinerant apostles and missionaries, it gives this advice:

*Now, as regards the apostles and prophets, act strictly according to the precept of the Gospel. Upon his arrival every apostle must be welcomed as the Lord; but he must not stay except one day. In case of necessity, however, he may stay the next day also; but if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. At his departure the apostle must receive nothing except food to last till the next night's lodging; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet... No prophet who in an ecstasy orders the table spread, must partake of it; otherwise, he is a false prophet ... If anyone says in ecstasy, "Give me money," or something else, you must not listen to him. However, should he tell you to give something for others who are in need, let no one condemn him... Every genuine prophet who is willing to settle among you is entitled to his support. Likewise, every genuine teacher is, like a laborer, entitled to his support... Of money and cloth and any other possession, first set aside a portion according to your discretion and give it according to the commandment.*

As far as the apostles are concerned, they are encouraged by Jesus to be discreet about the home in which they stay. They are to remain only in “worthy” households that they bless by their presence. A “worthy” household would be one that accepts the message of the apostle in a spirit of faith, and accepts the person of the apostle in a spirit of hospitality: Jesus tells the apostles not to waste time with rejection--to leave to heaven the house or town where their message is rejected. The apostles are sent to proclaim the good news, not to compel or force people to believe. By being heralds of the Lord, the apostles fulfill their apostolic obligation; they will not be judged guilty of the spiritual neglect of their neighbor. By shaking off the dust from their sandals, they make the symbolic gesture that they are no longer responsible for the salvation of those who have rejected their message.



Jesus makes clear that people being evangelized have a serious moral obligation to accept, in faith, the gospel message. His teaching seems to imply that with the proper proclamation of the Gospel by the missionary, comes the grace of faith. However, such grace always leaves the recipient free to refuse to believe--Jesus does not compel belief. Nevertheless, He views a rejection of this grace to be gravely sinful. He proclaims that it will go better on Judgment Day for those who have sinned in the flesh than for those who have sinned in the spirit.

As Jesus is about to leave His apostles behind in this world, He gives them somewhat different advice. Luke recorded these words of Jesus:

*He asked them, "When I sent you on mission without purse or traveling bag or sandals, were you in need of anything?" "Not a thing," they replied. He said to them: "Now, however, the man who has a purse must carry it; the same with the traveling bag. And the man without a sword must sell his coat and buy one."*

*Lk. 22:35-36*

Does Jesus make a distinction here between the apostles living in the world and their mission to proclaim the gospel? When it comes to evangelization, we have seen that they must depend completely upon their divine gifts and God's grace for success. However, when it comes to their survival in this world, they need human prudence in order to survive in a world in which they too may be reckoned "among the wicked."

### SHEEP AMONG WOLVES

Jesus informed the apostles: "*What I am doing is sending you out like sheep among wolves. You must be clever as snakes and innocent as doves. Be on your guard with respect to others (Mt. 10:16).*" The Semitic people had a fondness for attributing human characteristics to animals and then referring to people as a certain kind of animal. This was very common in the wisdom literature of the Jews. Jesus combines a strange pair--a snake and a dove--and encourages His disciples to adopt their characteristics. He encourages His sheep-like disciples to be more like the snake in order for them to survive among the wolf-like people where He is sending them. The snake appears as a prudent creature who knows where he is going and how to get there; the snake knows when to remain concealed and when and where to strike. However, on the other hand they must remain

harmless as the dove. Cleverness as well as prudent behavior must be their defense. *"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."* In their relationship with others, they must be on their guard not to be injured needlessly. They are not to go and seek martyrdom--they are commissioned to be evangelists, not martyrs. Jesus expects His disciples to have the good sense to leave a dangerous situation. As He puts it:

*When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. I solemnly assure you, you will not have covered the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*  
Mt. 10:23

This last statement has caused interpreters a lot of reflection. Some see it as a reflection of the early Church's expectancy of a speedy return of Jesus in glory. Some have suggested it may refer to God's judgment which fell upon Israel with the destruction of the Nation by the Romans.

Jesus foresaw the sufferings and persecution to be endured by his disciples for proclaiming the Gospel. He sought to forewarn them, for the Gospel contains truth capable of revolutionizing religion, society--mankind. Jesus knew the human heart. He understood what the reaction of the heart which prefers darkness to light would be when the light of truth shines upon it. John recorded these words of Jesus:

*The light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked. Everyone who practices evil hates the light; he does not come near it for fear his deeds will be exposed.*  
Jn. 3:19-20

Jesus made it clear: a world in darkness hates the light of truth, and avoids it! But when the world cannot avoid this light because the bearers of truth remain in its midst, its hatred of the light is transferred to the bearers. The apostles and disciples will experience that degree of persecution allowed by society. Some will be despised, ostracized, vilified, and subject to all modes of injustice: they will be beaten, robbed, imprisoned, and murdered. Jesus said that all this will even be done in the name of God and religion.

In Ruleville, Mississippi, a simple gravestone marks the tomb of Fannie Lou Hamer and it reads: *"I am sick and tired of being sick and tired!"* In the summer of 1962, Fannie Lou was a sharecropper who walked out of the cotton field at the age of 45 to register to vote for the first time in her life.

This action would make it impossible for her to ever return. When she failed the literacy test, she couldn't be registered. She informed the clerk that he would see her every 30 days for the rest of her life. Within the span of life which remained to her, she would experience bitter persecution, harassment, threats upon her life, imprisonment, and severe beatings at the hands of her guards. It all began by Fannie Lou's desire to vote "*in the land of the free and the home of the brave.*" Fannie Lou once said:

*I'm never sure anymore when I leave home whether I'll get back or not. Sometimes it seems like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed. But if I fall, I'll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom. I'm not backing off that, and no one will have to cover the ground I walk as far as freedom is concerned.*

She never backed off...

It is certainly a fact that when people love darkness and seek to engulf others in it, they have a special fear and hatred for the truth. When such people gain political power within society, they seek first of all to control the communication of ideas--freedom of speech being one of the first human rights denied. There is indeed a power in truth, and its very proclamation produces not only hatred but fear in its enemies.

Jesus warns the disciples that to tell the gospel-truth any day is to run the risk of being persecuted, even killed. Persecution will first come from their own fellow Jews who will drag them before the Sanhedrin and local Jewish courts: "*They will hale you into court, they will flog you in their synagogues (Mt. 10:17).*" They will be brought before the rulers of their own people and later they will stand before the Gentiles and be judged: "*You will be brought to trial before rulers and kings, to give witness before them and before the Gentiles on my account (Mt. 10:18).*" Jesus seeks to remind the Apostles and disciples to keep in mind that all this comes to be because they represent God in this world, not themselves. It is God's truth that is on trial, and only God can defend it. They must not become anxious about witnessing in court; God will speak through them:

*When they hand you over do not worry about what you will say or how you will say it. When the hour comes, you will be given what you are to say. You yourselves will not be the speakers; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you. Mt. 10:19-20*

## CAUSE OF DIVISION

Essentially, Jesus is the Cause of Peace in the world. As Paul writes, God is reconciling the world to himself in Christ. Reconciliation with God is peace. Such reconciliation comes only with the acceptance of Jesus Christ in faith. To reject Christ is to reject God's peace and reconciliation. It became clear, in the apostolic ministry of the Church, that many would not accept God's terms for peace on earth. God's terms demand belief in Jesus Christ. Since Christ came into this world he objectively became a cause of division within society. Jesus stressed the division would begin in the smallest cell of society: the family.

The acceptance or rejection of Christ becomes for each of us a personal matter--a decision the human heart alone can make. Jesus tells the apostles:

*Do not suppose that my mission on earth is to spread peace. My mission is to spread, not peace, but division. I have come to set a man at odds with his father, a daughter with her mother, a daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law: in short, to make a man's enemies those of his own household.* *Mt. 10:34-35*

*Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child; children will turn against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all on account of me. But whoever holds out till the end will escape death.* *Mt. 10:21-22*

Jesus makes clear that if the Gospel message and the acceptance of Christ bring division into one's family, the disciple must choose the Christian Community over the natural family. Jesus clarifies the consequences of loving family or friends above one's Christian commitment: "*Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me (Mt. 10:37).*" He brings the apostles and disciples back to a basic principle of Christianity: self-denial for the sake of Christ. Paradoxically, it is the only means to real personal life:

*He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me. He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin, whereas he who brings himself to naught for me discovers who he is.* *Mt. 10:38-39*

Sufferings come to the disciples because they are identified in this world with Jesus. It cannot be any other way because the world so ill-treated Him: He bore it all because He represented, not Himself, but God in the world. What it all boils down to is not so much hatred for the disciples or for the man Jesus, but the hatred of God in Jesus and His disciples. It comes down to man's personal rejection and hatred of God. Jesus teaches:

*No pupil outranks his teacher, no slave his master. The pupil should be glad to become like his teacher, the slave like his master. If they call the head of the house Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! Do not let them intimidate you.*

*Mt. 10:24-25*

The disciples have become identified with Jesus and have become partners in the divine enterprise of saving the world. This involves the proclamation of truth in the world. Jesus confirms:

*Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed and nothing hidden that will not become known. What I tell you in darkness, speak in the light. What you hear in private, proclaim from the housetops.*

*Mt. 10:26-27*

Because of their close association with Jesus and the personal and private instructions received from Him, they have become enlightened. He intends for them to be "*the light of the world.*" Jesus knows men will seek to intimidate them, instill fear in them, seek to silence them one way or another. He encourages them to choose physical death rather than a denial or betrayal of His cause. The choice of physical death will be the choice of eternal life. By holding out till the end they will escape eternal death. To encourage them, Jesus says:

*Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna.*

*Mt. 10:28*

If a disciple must have fear, then may he fear only the loss of eternal life. Physical life will end on earth, and then man must face eternity where there is a heaven to gain and a hell to avoid.

Jesus places before His apostles and disciples the final end of life to encourage them to pay, without regret, the price of discipleship. Jesus Christ Himself paid the price in full. The importance of discipleship must not be lost upon them. They represent Jesus Christ in this world. They have been made heralds of a truth which must be heard. The proclamation of His gospel, in every age, is essential for the salvation of human beings. It must be proclaimed in the face of darkness and evil. Such obstacles must not frighten the disciples into silence and into hiding the light of their life under some bushel basket. Let all things be seen in the light of faith and weighed in the light of eternity. The Christian Disciple has become, in time, the beloved of the Father who holds the power of eternal life and death--whose eye is upon the sparrow and knows the number of hairs upon one's head. This Father holds the disciples of Jesus Christ in the hollow of His hand. To them again, Jesus says:

*Do not let them intimidate you. Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul... Are not two sparrows sold for next to nothing? Yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, every hair on your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything. You are worthy more than an entire flock of sparrows.*  
*Mt. 10:26-31*

Jesus truly encourages His apostles to fear neither physical death nor eternal loss.

This world holds no greater gifts than the apostles of Jesus Christ, and the reception we give them--the blessing conferred upon them--has eternal consequences for those who receive them in faith and love. Jesus has made their reward His personal responsibility:

*He who welcomes you welcomes me, and he who welcomes me welcomes him who sent me ... And I promise you that whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones because he is a disciple will not want for his reward.*  
*Mt. 10:40,42*

When the cost of Christian Discipleship is assessed in the light of Final Judgment, the price, even though it be martyrdom, becomes insignificant before this promise made by Jesus Christ:

*Whoever acknowledges me before men I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. Whoever disowns me before men I will disown before my Father in heaven.* *Mt.10:32-33*

## CHAPTER 12

### SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

#### INTRODUCTION

At this point Matthew presents the turning point in the public ministry of Jesus Christ. Matthew had introduced Jesus as the teacher of truth and righteousness. Jesus toured all Galilee teaching publicly in all their cities; He proclaimed in all their synagogues the reign of God. *“Reform your lives! The kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mt. 4:17).”* Jesus taught the people by the shores of the sea and upon the mountain sides. Jesus *“...left the crowds spellbound at his teaching. The reason was that he taught with authority, and not like their scribes (Mt. 7:28-29).”* Not like their scribes! Jesus’ words carried a power which moved and stirred the hearts of His hearers. These teachings, the early Church conserved. Matthew recorded the heart of these teachings in the pearl of discourses--the Sermon on the Mount. The Psalmist warned Israel:

*Oh, that today you would hear his voice: “Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as in the days of Massah in the desert, where your fathers tempted me; they tested me though they had seen my works. Forty years I loathed that generation, and I said: They are a people of erring heart, and they know not my ways. Therefore I swore in my anger: they shall not enter into my rest.”*  
Ps. 95:7c-11

Jesus appeared in Galilee as the Man of God fully clothed in the armor of God. The man of God said: *“... Let him come to me and find out that there is a prophet in Israel (2Kgs. 5:8).”* Matthew related: *“They carried to him all those afflicted with various diseases and racked with pain: the possessed, the lunatics, the paralyzed. He cured them all (Mt. 4:24).”* And Jesus said that should be the proof they need.

In the first sermon he preached, Peter reflected: *“Men of Israel listen to me. Jesus the Nazarene was a man whom God sent to you with miracles,*



wonders, and signs as his credentials. These God worked through him, in your midst, as you well know (Acts 2:22).” Indeed, Jesus had impressed the crowd and they proclaimed: “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel (Mt. 9:33).” However, despite all these impressive teachings and wonderful signs, a mysterious opposition to Jesus, personally, arose among the people stimulated by certain influential groups in Israel. Matthew had already recorded this negative reaction to Jesus, “But the Pharisees were saying: ‘He casts out demons through the prince of demons’ (Mt. 9:3,4).” Luke had recorded that when Mary and Joseph took the infant Jesus to the temple for His dedication, the holy man Simeon held Jesus in his arms and prophesied: “This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed (Lk. 2:34).” Simeon proclaimed Jesus to be a divine sign from heaven. Jesus not only performed heavenly signs, His very person was a sign from heaven. Jesus is the heavenly sign which provokes a storm of protest in Israel.

Matthew develops this theme of protest and rejection of the Messiah. The struggle between light and darkness surfaces. In Jesus, divine truth faces disappointment, disbelief, and total rejection. Within the scenes to follow, Jesus will be interrogated, suspected, maligned, and accused of being intrinsically evil. Jesus will counter-act; He will defend His position.

Within the process, the true spirit opposing Jesus will be manifested. Lines will be sharply drawn, separating the believers from non-believers, friends from foes. It is a war with no neutrality--to remain neutral to Jesus is to side with the opposition. As Jesus put it, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters (Mt. 12:30).”

### AN ENCOUNTER WITH JOHN

Jesus continues His mission in the face of this growing opposition. He continues to proclaim the reign of God and its divine truth. However, a striking change occurs in Jesus’ mission from this point on. As disbelief and rejection increase, signs, wonders, and miracles decrease. They all but cease. At this point Matthew makes no mention of them. He states simply, “When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he left that locality to teach and preach in their towns (Mt. 11:1).”

As Matthew continues to unfold Jesus’ mission, the relationship between such divine works as healing and exorcism of unclean spirits and a particular

quality of faith in Jesus Christ becomes clearer. This teaching becomes very evident when Jesus visits His home town of Nazareth. We are told, "*And he did not work many miracles there because of their lack of faith (Mt. 13:58).*" If one has no faith in Jesus, one will hardly request miracles from Him. A lack of faith in Jesus is truly a personal rejection of Him. To accept Jesus as a good man, or a nice guy, is no acceptance but a rejection of the person who claims to be the Messiah of Israel, and more--to be the Son of God. Thomas the Apostle expresses well the only true acceptance of Jesus when he professes before Jesus, "*My Lord, and my God!*"

Matthew begins this next section of his narrative with an encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist. It was not a personal encounter, for John remained imprisoned in Herod's dungeon at Macharius, a palace fortress built upon some desolate height from which it gazed down, like some lethal bird, upon the Dead Sea. From here, the imprisoned John sent two of his disciples to interrogate Jesus. These two came as the *sheluhim* of John the Baptist. To Luke we owe the number "two," for from previous studies we know that the witness of two or three men was required for the legal verification of a fact.

Matthew had already presented the disciples of John as negative towards Jesus and His disciples. Their critical attitude towards Jesus was implied in their question: "*Why is it that while we and the Pharisees fast, your disciples do not (Mt. 9:14)?*" John's disciples have a problem accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Seemingly, Jesus does not project for them the proper image of the Messiah. Perhaps John possesses something of the same problem? Those who would not call the faith of John into question, suggest John sent his disciples to Jesus for their own personal enlightenment. Whether this is true or not, the fact remains that God makes a unique revelation to Israel--to all mankind--in Jesus.

The role of the Messiah, as projected by Jesus, is startling to all Israel. His projection of the Messiah is so shocking that most refuse to accept the fact of His Messianic role. Jesus does not fit the role-image. He fails to live up to the people's expectations. To accept a person such as Jesus as the Messiah would destroy the hopes of Israel--it would plunge the nation into despair. As it was, only their Messianic expectations saved the nation from complete despair. Only the Messiah of God could deliver the people of God from the domination of Rome and exalt Israel above every nation upon the face of the earth. All this had been foretold by the prophets and must come

to be. Jesus of Nazareth could not be the Messiah. If not the Messiah, then who is this Jesus of Nazareth? The people as a whole were wondering, while the Pharisees labored to dispel their doubts.

John heard the rumors among the people about Jesus through his disciples. As we know from Matthew, Jesus began His public ministry after the imprisonment of John. As for John, we do not possess a great deal of information. From what we do know, John appeared to preach a fierce judgment coming upon the world with the advent of the Messiah. John urged immediate repentance in order to escape the impending destruction and condemnation of sinners by the Messiah. He would say to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him:

*You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? Give some evidence that you mean to reform....Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

*Lk. 3:7-9*

*....there is one to come who is mightier than I... (He will) clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.*

*Lk. 3:16,17*

This is the type of billing that John gave to the coming Messiah. Jesus certainly did not live up to John's advanced publicity. Jesus does not appear on the scene as "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." Nor as one "loosening his mighty lightning from his terrible swift sword." Rather, the Messiah, in Jesus, appears as a shepherd seeking His lost sheep. In Jesus, the Messiah comes filled with pity for sinners rather than with wrath. "At the sight of the crowd, His heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd (Mt. 9:36)." This is not the kind of Messiah of which John dreamed who would come and "clear the threshing floor and burn the chaff in unquenchable fire."

When you think of John's expectations of the Messiah and Jesus' projection of the Messiah, it is not surprising that Jesus caused John some difficulty. Someone once observed: "A thousand difficulties with faith do not equal one doubt in faith." Personally, John may not have been in doubt, but Jesus certainly puzzled him. According to Luke, Jesus likewise puzzled Mary and Joseph: "But they did not grasp what he said to them. . . His

*mother meanwhile kept all these things in memory (Lk. 2:50-51).*” We need to bear in mind that Jesus, Mary, Joseph, John, the apostles, and the disciples lived as the mystery of His life and mission unfolded. We, for our part, hear the story unfold already knowing its glorious ending. It would be helpful if we could place ourselves in the historical setting and seek to see the events through the eyes of the eye-witnesses; in a word, to see and judge the incident without reference to our Easter faith. However, as previously mentioned, even the evangelists could not help but be influenced in His presentation by the subsequent Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that in Jesus the Word was made Flesh.

Never had such a revelation of God existed before. The appearance of the Word Incarnate eclipsed any previous revelation and made any future revelation unnecessary. When the Son of God became Man, all mankind began again in its understanding of God. When the Scriptures confirm that Mary did not understand Jesus, we know that no human being understood. Israel certainly did not understand such a Messiah. When we are told of Mary’s reaction to Christ—*“Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart...His mother meanwhile kept all these things in her memory (Lk. 2:19,51)”*—we are being instructed as to how to understand *“the Word made Flesh.”*

The Book of Hebrews stated it well: *“In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our fathers through the prophets (Heb. 1:1).”* In this, the final age, He has spoken to us through His Son whom He has made heir of all things and through whom He created the universe. This Son is the reflection of the Father’s glory—the exact representation of the Father’s Being; He sustains all things by His powerful Word.

Meanwhile, Matthew describes the final encounter of Jesus with John in these words:

*Now John in prison heard about the works Christ was performing, and sent a message by his disciples to ask him, “Are you ‘He who is to come’ or do we look for another?” In reply, Jesus said to them: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear,*

*dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them. Blest is the man who finds no stumbling block in me.”*  
Mt. 11:2-6

John's question seems to imply some confusion in his mind concerning the role of Jesus. Is he the Messiah? John's question implies, also, that he is open to divine instruction on this matter. Jesus does not directly confirm that He is the Messiah. This would be self-witnessing. Jesus offers as testimony to His messiah-ship the revelations of Scripture and the manifest power of God through Him. Jesus' reply to John is an implied reference to the prophecy of Isaiah which the Jews expected to be fulfilled through the Messiah. Isaiah foretold in reference to the messianic age:

*On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book; and out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see. The lowly will ever find joy in the Lord, and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.*  
Is. 29:18-19

*Then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing.*  
Is. 35:6

Jesus added to Isaiah's list the healing of lepers and the raising of her dead; he does even more works than foretold by Isaiah. As the Messiah, Jesus is more than Israel expected—more than foretold. The mention of the cure of leprosy and the raising of the dead by Jesus recall the words of an ancient king of Israel “... *Am I a God with power over life and death that this man should send someone to me to be cured of leprosy (2Kgs. 5:7)?*” All the deeds mentioned by Jesus had already been ascribed to Him by Matthew. Luke mentions, “*The disciples of John brought their teacher news of these happenings (Lk. 7:18).*” These reports puzzled John and stimulated him to send two disciples to question Jesus. Perhaps the key for John to understand Jesus and the Messianic role portrayed by Him, would be in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “*The lowly will find joy in the Lord, and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel (Is. 29:19).*” Matthew makes it clear: It's not the poor physically but the poor in Spirit.

One gets the impression that John wants sinners destroyed with a preference for fire as the means. It was two former disciples of John, James and John, who requested of Jesus, “*Lord, would you not have us call down fire from heaven to destroy them (Lk. 9:54)?*” These disciples of Jesus had a lot to

unlearn as ex-disciples of John. Jesus also desired to destroy sinful people; He desired to destroy sinful people by making them friends of God. In Jesus, God had called a moratorium on sending down fire upon sinners. The Father Willed all men to be saved, and so God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, but not the Christ expected by John or any other Jew. Jesus urged John not to lose faith, but to have confidence in the plan of God truly being carried out through His life and ministry. To reject Jesus as the Messiah and to look for another one more in keeping with ones own dreams and fantasies, is the rejection of the Messiah of God. In Jesus, the Messiah of God comes clothed in compassion and pity to save mankind. Jesus inaugurates a time of divine mercy in order that all men can be saved: "*Blessed is the man who finds no stumbling block*" in a Lord who appears among us as "*meek and humble of heart.*"

John eyes the justice of God; it also will be a reality. Justice will have its day, but that day is delayed. All who long for it, as John does, must wait in patience. Concerning this matter of divine retribution, the author of 2 Peter gives this teaching:

*The present heavens and earth are reserved by God's word for fire; they are kept for the day of judgment, the day when godless men will be destroyed. This point must not be overlooked, dear friends. In the Lord's eyes, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. The Lord does not delay in keeping his promise-though some consider it "delay." Rather, he shows you generous patience, since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance. The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and on that day the heavens will vanish with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and all its deeds will be made manifest.*

*2Pt. 3:7-10*

## JESUS' WITNESS TO JOHN

Whether the disciples of John liked it or not, Jesus made them evangelizers of the Gospel: "*Go back and report to John what you hear and see (Mt. 11:4).*" And they could only report good news. After their departure, Jesus gave His personal testimony of John the Baptist:

*...Jesus began to speak to the crowds: "What did you go out to the wasteland to see--a reed swaying in the wind? Tell me, what did you go out to see--someone luxuriously dressed? Remember, those who dress luxuriously are to be found in royal palaces. Why then did you go out--to see a prophet? A prophet indeed, and something more! It is about this man that Scripture says, 'I send my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way before you.' I solemnly assure you, history has not known a man born of woman greater than John the Baptizer. Yet the least born into the kingdom of God is greater than he. From John the Baptizer's time until now, the kingdom of God has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. All the prophets as well as the law spoke prophetically until John. If you are prepared to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who was certain to come. Heed carefully what you hear! Mt. 11:7-15*

Through His questions to the people concerning the characteristics and habits of John, Jesus was confirming the prophetic status of John in their minds. Jesus confirmed John to be an official prophet in Israel; He claimed that John ended that long prophetic silence in Israel. He went on to reveal that because of John's unique personality and mission, he was the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. In John, the prophecy of Malachi had been fulfilled. John came as the "angel" of the Lord sent by God to prepare the world for the entrance of His beloved Son. When Jesus said "*all the prophets as well as the law spoke prophetically unto John,*" He implied that He, Himself, fulfilled both prophecy and law.

Jesus reversed the customary practice of mentioning the law before the prophets, and subtly implied the pre-eminence of prophecy over law. As the prophet Malachi had prophesied, "*Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; ...Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day (Mal. 3:1,23),*" Israel expected the return of Elijah to herald the coming of the

messianic age. If Jesus is the Messiah, then John the Baptist must be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi. Jesus confirmed that Elijah had returned in John. Jesus prefaced His remark with: "*If you are prepared to accept it,*" because the acceptance of this truth depended upon the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.

The orthodox interpretation of the return of Elijah in John rules out any reincarnation theory. This incident does not support such a theory. In the case of Elijah, no death occurred. According to the Scriptures, Elijah is still incarnated in his own body. Jesus teaches here how the prophecy of Malachi has been fulfilled. Elijah returns in the spirit of John the Baptist. Elijah and John the Baptist still remain two distinct personalities.

Seemingly, Jesus speaks paradoxically of John when he says in one breath that John is the greatest man born of woman, and then in the next breath says that the least born into the kingdom of God is greater than he. In a sense, this statement clarifies the distinction between membership in the Old and the New Testaments--between the Old and the New covenants. John is the best of the Old and the question he asks implies he is still part of the Old Covenant.

To understand what Jesus means by the least being the greatest, we have to understand two things: Jesus' own relationship with God, and Jesus' own relationship with His disciples. As the Church came to understand both these relationships, she would teach that the disciples of Jesus are incorporated into Jesus Himself through the Sacrament of Baptism. In Christ, the disciples become "a new creation." Paul identifies the disciples with Jesus, and refers to them as the very Body of Christ.

Concerning Jesus' own birth and conception, Luke wrote, "*The angel (Gabriel) answered her (Mary): 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God (Lk. 1:35-36).'*" Since there is no comparison between Jesus Christ and any other human being--regardless of their personal greatness, the least of any person baptized into Christ would be greater than the holy men and women of the Old Testament. Such have been "born again," "*begotten of water and Spirit (Jn., 3:5).'*"



Jesus goes on to say: "*From John the Baptizer's time until now the kingdom of God has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force (Mt. 11:12).*" This statement continues to remain a difficulty for commentators. Some feel that Jesus speaks here of the violent reaction on the part of particular men to the coming of the reign of God and the hateful forces operative to keep people from entering the kingdom and to harass those who do. Others believe this interpretation falls short of Jesus' true meaning.

This interpretation seemingly fails to properly translate the concept of the kingdom of God being snatched or carried off. The later commentators see this text rather as referring to those men and women who willingly do that violence to their own wills demanded by the repentance preached by John and Jesus. Through a radical reformation of their lives, they have qualified themselves for entrance into the kingdom of heaven, and they are entering into the kingdom of heaven. Those who are willing to fulfill its demands are entering into the reign of God. They are carrying off the eternal prize.

#### REJECTION OF JOHN AND JESUS

It becomes painfully clear, as the gospel narrative unfolds, people do not properly respond to Jesus Christ. Being impressed with signs and wonders does not necessarily imply a willingness to radically reform one's life. Apparently such works do not automatically invoke a trust and confidence in the worker. Both John and Jesus preached repentance as a pre-requisite for God's Kingdom. This negative reaction of the people to Jesus implies that they have rejected the spirit of true repentance. Most commentators see the ministry of Jesus in Galilee, relatively speaking, as a failure. Only a few become true disciples of Jesus.

Jesus sees the Jewish people as perverse children who refuse to take part in anything not in accord with their own wills. Jesus illustrates their perversity of will by comparing them to children at play who refuse the invitation to play games with others. They are offered a choice but refuse altogether. Jesus says:

*What comparison can I use to describe this breed? They are like children squatting in the town squares, calling to their playmates: "We piped you a tune but you did not dance! We sang you a dirge, but you did not wail!!"* *Mt. 11:16-17*

In this illustration, Jesus symbolizes the reaction of the Jewish people to John and to Himself.

John, the ascetical prophet of the desert, warned Israel of the wrath and destruction to befall all who fail to repent; he called Israel to repentance and righteousness of life. Most Jews remained unmoved. Their fear was not sufficient to motivate any drastic change of life. Jesus, the Son of God sent by the heavenly Father, came filled with compassion and mercy. He invited all to enter the reign of Heaven and to experience its joys and peace. However, those unmoved by fear instilled by John remained unmoved by the loving appeal of Jesus. Neither fear nor love could move them. Jesus observed:

*In other words, John appeared neither eating nor drinking, and people say, 'He is mad!' The Son of Man appeared eating and drinking, and they say, 'This one is a glutton and drunkard, a lover of tax collectors and those outside the law!' Yet time will prove where wisdom lies.*

*Mt. 11:19*

Jesus implied with this teaching that no matter how the Will of God is presented to these people--in the ascetical way of John or in the joyous way of Jesus--the Divine Will remained unacceptable to them. This obstinacy on their part revealed their intrinsic opposition to the Will of God. These men rationalized away the witness of Jesus and John, claiming one to be a sinner and the other a mad man. They rationalized away the Will of God. As Luke later observed, "*The Pharisees and the lawyers, on the other hand, by failing to receive his baptism, defeated God's plan in their regard (Lk. 7:30).*" Jesus commented: "*Yet time will prove where wisdom lies (Mt. 11:19).*" Or as recorded in Luke, "*God's wisdom is vindicated by all who accept it (Lk. 7:35).*"

"*Wisdom*" refers to the salvific plan of God. Time will demonstrate that Israel rejected God's plan for its salvation. Jesus, as the Word made Flesh, is Wisdom Incarnate. Time will reveal that:

*This Jesus is "the stone rejected by you the builders, which has become the cornerstone." There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved.*

*Acts 4:11-12*

## THE PRICE FOR REJECTION

Who could measure the sorrow Jesus personally experienced in the face of such wholesale rejection by the people He loved so dearly. How well Jesus knew His importance to Israel. Luke mentions the tears of Jesus over Jerusalem:

*Coming within sight of the city, he wept over it and said: "If only you had known the path to peace this day; but you have completely lost it from view! Days will come upon you when your enemies will encircle you with a rampart, hem you in and press you hard from every side. They will wipe you out, you and your children within your walls, and leave not a stone on a stone within you because you failed to recognize the time of your visitation."*  
Lk. 19:41-44

*....How often have I wanted to gather your children together as a mother bird collects her young under her wings, and you refused me!*  
Lk. 13:34

Perhaps only Mary, His Mother, understood in any degree, the sorrow of her son. Simeon foretold this sorrow to her and immediately added: "...and you yourself shall be pierced with a sword so that the thoughts (and the choices) of many hearts may be laid bare (Lk. 2:35)." Small wonder we will hear the Lord say when the end of His earthly life is upon him: "My heart is nearly broken with sorrow (Mt. 26:38)."

To cause sorrow to the heart of Jesus and remain unmoved--unrepentant--is no small sin. People cannot continually reject the mercy of God coming through Jesus Christ and still escape the justice of God. To reject mercy is to receive justice. Jesus warned of this when He saw so little fruit produced by so much loving labor. We read in Matthew:

*He began to reproach the towns where most of his miracles had been worked, with their failure to reform: "It will go ill with you Chorazin! And just as ill with you Bethsaida! If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have reformed in sackcloth and ashes long ago. I assure you, it will go easier for Tyre and Sidon than for you on the day of judgment. As for you, Capernaum, 'Are you to be exalted to the skies? You*

*shall go down to the realm of death!’ If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Sodom, it would be standing today. I assure you, it will go easier for Sodom than for you on the day of judgment.”*

*Mt. 11:20-24*

Three cities are mentioned as the recipients of many miracles by Jesus: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. Chorazin, a lake city, was located about two miles north of Capernaum; Bethsaida, another lake city, was located on the north end of the Sea of Galilee, on the East Bank. Bethsaida has been identified as the home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip. These two cities are compared to the two Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon; they were noted more for their commerce than for their immorality. However, the prophets often condemned them for their secularism.

Jesus compared the Jewish people of Chorazin and Bethsaida with the pagan people of Tyre and Sidon. We know how much the Jews despised such people. The Lord said that the Jews failed to repent in the face of great divine manifestation within their cities, but that the pagan people would not have been so obstinate--they would have repented. He warned that the pagans would fare better on the day of Judgment than these unrepentant Jews.

Capernaum is the third city mentioned. In this city, Jesus Himself had dwelled. He compared the final judgment of Capernaum with Sodom. For the Jews, Sodom symbolized immorality and the curse of God. Jesus implies that Capernaum’s pride and obstinacy far exceeded the evil of Sodom. If Sodom had received the divine visitation enjoyed by Capernaum, it would have repented and still be standing today. Jesus declared the pride of Capernaum would bring it from the heights to death itself. Today, Capernaum is but an archeological graveyard.

Of course, these three cities represent the inhabitants of the cities. Spiritual disaster is being foretold, for these people failed to repent in the face of so many divine manifestations within their lives. Divine love came to them in Jesus through the miracles that touched their physical lives. Nevertheless, they hardened their hearts against Jesus and His invitation. Even though they may not have consciously experienced it as so, theirs was a very personal rejection of God. Jesus revealed that the final judgment would be one of justice for those who reject the mercy of God

in their lives. All things will be weighed in the balance. To whom much has been given, much will be demanded; to whom little has been given, little will be demanded.

The judgment upon the citizens of these cities could well symbolize the judgment to fall upon many who have possessed membership in the Church. In a real sense, Jesus has lived in our midst, and our lives have experienced many spiritual graces and signs of God's providential love for us. Despite all this, many Christian lives express no love of Christ, no true commitment to His Church. People cannot rest securely just because they have never inhabited Sodom and Gomorrah. The citizens of Capernaum will receive a heavier judgment than those of Sodom--their evil was of the spirit rather than of the flesh.

### REJECTION OF THE WISE AND STRONG

When Jesus compared those who accepted Him with the scribes and the Pharisees and their disciples, He realized that He had been rejected by the leaders of the people--those considered wise. He had been accepted by the "little ones"--the child-like and uncomplicated people. They possessed openness to truth which made them potentially receptive to the revelations of God's Holy Spirit. Those men trained in the law and the traditions of the ancient, had actually been hindered in their coming to God. Their knowledge of the Scriptures became a stumbling block to their accepting the very truths revealed by the Scriptures. Intellectual pride corrupted their religious spirit. They so identified their understanding with the Will and Spirit of God that they refused to consider the claims of Christ that called into question their interpretation of the Scriptures. The Divine Revelations of Christ went far beyond their theology and faith commitment.

In Jesus, the Spirit of God certainly surpassed all their beliefs, and even the spirit of the law. Pride locked these men into resisting the very Spirit of God. They believed that the Torah contained the complete expression of God's will for mankind. Since these men possessed a most exact knowledge of the Torah, only they could adequately judge what was of God and what was not of God! They judged Jesus of Nazareth was not of God.

The Old Testament Scriptures reveal, only in a veiled manner, the wisdom of God to be revealed in the Messiah. This wisdom demanded a personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ who revealed more than the law could ever hold. Jesus saw the Will of God as being revealed in both the men and women who accepted Him, and in those who rejected Him. In a prayer of thanksgiving, Jesus both acknowledged and accepted the Will of God. Naturally speaking, Jesus could not but desire that all men accept Him in faith. Matthew records:

*On one occasion Jesus spoke thus: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, to you I offer praise; for what you have hidden from the learned and the clever you have revealed to the merest children. Father, it is true. You have graciously willed it so."*

*Mt. 11:25-26*

Paul reflecting on this same truth wrote to the Corinthians:

*Scripture says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and thwart the cleverness of the clever." Where is the wise man to be found? Where the scribe? Where is the master of worldly argument? Has not God turned the wisdom of this world into folly? Since in God's wisdom the world did not come to know him through "wisdom," it pleased God to save those who believe through the absurdity of the preaching of the gospel.*

*Cor. 1:19-21*

God chose those whom the world considered absurd to shame the wise; He singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong; He chose the world's lowborn and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something so that mankind could do no boasting before God. As Jesus said, *"Time will prove where wisdom lies."*

Matthew followed the condemnation of the three cities, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, with a revelation by Jesus that emphasized the seriousness of the sin involved in the deliberate rejection of Jesus Christ, His teachings, His ministry, His Person. The words of Jesus now quoted by Matthew have no parallel in this gospel account. This particular text has received great attention from commentators and has stimulated much discussion among scholars. It has been seen as a meteor falling from John the Evangelist's heaven. Jesus said:

*Everything has been given over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son--and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him. Mt. 11:27*

Jesus had only previously acknowledged the Father as Lord of heaven and earth. His words now imply this Lordship has been given over to Him. This text clearly manifests Jesus' conscious awareness of *His own divinity*. Jesus identifies Himself as the *Wisdom of God*. When Jesus equates His knowledge with that of the Father, He clearly manifests His conscious divinity. With the statement that only the Father possesses the adequate power to know the Son and the Son possesses the adequate power to know the Father, Jesus places both the Father and the Son on the same transcendental divine plane of existence. It flows from this truth that the Son alone can adequately reveal the Divine Nature. Jesus shares this Divine Revelation with whom He wills. It is the disciples who come to a true knowledge of God through their association and understanding of Jesus. This truth is made crystal clear in the Fourth Gospel:

*"Lord," Philip said to him, "show us the Father and that will be enough for us." "Philip," Jesus replied, "after I have been with you all this time, you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak are not spoken of myself; it is the Father who lives in me accomplishing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works I do. Jn. 14:8-11*

This revelation of Jesus lies in direct opposition to the belief of the Pharisees who claim they possess God's complete revelation in the law and the prophets. Those scholars who insist Jesus possessed no such divine consciousness during His earthly life, arbitrarily insist the above text to be a later insert into the Scripture. However, such an opinion must contend with the same teaching in Luke Chapter 10 verse 22. It has been rightly observed that this statement attributed to Jesus is as strongly supported in the Scriptures as any scriptural teaching. The above text expresses the traditional belief of the early church concerning the nature of Jesus Christ. This belief rests upon the teaching of Jesus Himself.

n the light of this divine reality, Jesus can validly make this most sublime offer and gift of love to mankind. It is an offer addressed to those people *“lying prostrate from exhaustion like sheep without a shepherd, at the sight of whom his heart was moved with pity.”* Since the wise of this world reject Jesus, He turns to the poor, the weary, the burdened, and the sinful. He offers to become their Good Shepherd and to lead them to refreshment and peace. Jesus said:

*Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.*

*Mt. 11:29-30*

The Jews referred to the Mosaic Law as the *“yoke of Yahweh.”* The Jews considered it a heavy yoke. When the traditions of the ancients, the legal interpretations of the law, were added to the Torah, Judaism indeed became a heavy burden to bear. Jesus made reference to this when He said: *“Woe to you lawyers also! You lay impossible burdens on men but you will not lift a finger to lighten them (Lk. 11:46).”* The reign of God coming in Jesus Christ fulfills the law of the prophets and supersedes it.

Jesus invites people to accept the reign of God which comes in Him. Jesus Christ perfectly and completely expresses the Divine Will in this world. Jesus asks people to accept the expressed Will of God into their lives--to humbly submit their hearts and spirits to the Spirit of God. This submission becomes the *“yoke”* of the New Covenant. In reality, the very Person of Jesus becomes the yoke which Jesus asks people to accept and to bear. Jesus becomes a burden. To these He promises, *“My yoke is easy and my burden light,”* and He can do this because His yoke is not a legalistic one but a living personal one.

A person receives the invitation to accept, in faith and confidence, the Person of Jesus into his life--the Lordship of Jesus over his life. Not only must Jesus be accepted by a person, but Jesus must also become the model for personal living. The person becomes a disciple who remains a faithful student at the feet of the Master learning daily to be more like Him.



In the end, as Paul expressed it, *"to put on the Lord Jesus Christ."* It becomes a *"light and easy yoke"* because of the nature of his Master: *"Learn of me because I am gentle and humble of heart."* Jesus says He has a gentle and humble personality. We learn all about the gentleness and humility of God by observing and studying the Person of Jesus. To the disciples who are willing *"to learn"* to be like Jesus, the Lord promises them, *"Your souls will find rest!"* They will find fulfillment of life. Those *"burdens"* of life, which a disciple of Jesus can no more escape than Jesus did, will not overcome, overburden, or destroy them if they are born in union with Jesus. Jesus promised, *"And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world (Mt. 28:20)."* Till the end of one's earthly life.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we discover that certain Christians did not have complete trust and confidence in the Person Jesus. They needed the extra, added security of the Mosaic Law. In its yoke they found spiritual security. Not only this, but they sought to place this yoke around the necks of the Gentile converts. Peter discerned how deviously such a practice undermined the Christian Faith. Within the First General Council of the Church, Peter stood up and firmly declared:

*"Why, then, do you put God to the test by trying to place on the shoulders of these converts a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear? Our belief is rather that we are saved by the favor of the Lord Jesus and so are they." At that the whole assembly fell silent.*  
*Acts 15:10-12*

Jesus' invitation always stands: *"Come to me!"* If, in the actual living of daily life, the burdens and trials of human existence become too much, too overwhelming, too destructive, we may discover we are going it alone or seeking the wrong help or helper. Often we do not come--as invited and encouraged--to Jesus who promised the weary and the burdened: *"I will refresh you."* All this is the language, not of a prophet of God, but of a Son.

## CHAPTER 13

### JESUS AND HIS ENEMIES

#### INTRODUCTION

Reflecting back upon the life of Jesus of Nazareth, John the Evangelist wrote: *"To his own he came, yet his own did not accept him. Any who did accept him he empowered to become children of God (Jn. 1:11-12)."* Many have pondered over that statement and asked, *"Why did his own not accept him?"*

At the time of Jesus, the leading laymen among the Jews belonged to the powerful and influential religious party of the Pharisees. The members of this party--along with the members of the Sadducee party--appeared on the gospel scene as strongly opposing Jesus of Nazareth. Members of both parties refused to acknowledge Jesus' claim to being the Messiah of Israel. However, both recognized the powerful influence exercised by Jesus over the common people. They feared the ultimate effect of Jesus upon the people and their religion. They diligently labored to offset and eliminate Jesus' influence among the Jewish people. They began by seeking to destroy his good reputation and ended by seeking to destroy his very person.

The Pharisees stand out in the gospel accounts as the foremost enemies of Jesus. They appeared as the central force opposing Jesus. Their influence turned the tide of public opinion against Jesus. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, they continued by the persecution and harassment of the Christian Community. They were the only religious party to survive the Jewish war with the Romans. It was the surviving members of this party which marshaled the spirit of the Jews. They centered and concentrated religious life around the synagogue, thus enabling Judaism to survive after the destruction of the temple and the vanishing priesthood. They labored to preserve the purity of the Jewish faith. They designed an exacting standard by which they would judge the inspired scriptures. As a result of their measuring standard, they rejected the popular Greek version of the scriptures, the Septuagint Bible, and certain scriptures previously considered inspired. Since they believed Jewish Christians affirmed heretical beliefs in regard to Jesus the Nazorean, they sought to destroy the Christian influence in the Jewish

Community by excommunicating from the synagogue; all Jews who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. We read in the Fourth Gospel:

*...the Jews, who had already agreed among themselves that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.*  
Jn. 9:22

Naturally speaking, the fact that the Jewish religion survived the wars with the Romans is due largely to the zeal of the Pharisees. Hostile feelings towards the Pharisees would have been very much alive within the Christian Community when the New Testament was being written. The Acts of the Apostles even suggests that certain problems existing in the early Christian Community stemmed from the presence of Pharisees within the Community. We read in Acts:

*Some men came down to Antioch from Judea and began to teach the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved." This created dissension and much controversy between them and Paul and Barnabus.*  
Acts 15:1-2

At the Jerusalem council we hear, "Some of the converted Pharisees then got up and demanded that such Gentiles be circumcised and told to keep the Mosaic law (Acts 15:5)." It was no doubt these very men that Paul referred to in his letter to the Galatians:

*Certain false claimants to the title of brother were smuggled in; they wormed their way into the group to spy on the freedom we enjoy in Christ Jesus and thereby to make slaves of us, but we did not submit to them for a moment. We resisted so that the truth of the gospel might survive intact for your benefit.*  
Gal. 2:4-5

Since the members of the Pharisee party appear as major protagonists in the Gospel and within the early Christian Church, let us, before proceeding in our study, reflect briefly upon this party and the kind of men who composed it.

The name *Pharisee* is commonly held to come from the Hebrew *perusim* or the Aramaic *perissazza*--probably meaning the *separated ones*. Since being *separated* was such an important element in religious worship, an essential condition for religious purity and consecration, the concept *Pharisee* most likely signifies *holy one*. The Pharisees were those people who kept themselves

*consecrated and unspotted* within this world in order to have ready access to God in worship and to be acceptable to Him. A person who joined such a religious society desired to be a holy person--dedicated and acceptable to God. He consciously withdrew from the general society, rejecting its moral behavior as insufficient to please God, even being obnoxious and an abomination to God. Such conduct always had an eye upon religious worship. The Jews believed they approached God through the sacrificial worship in the temple.

Obviously, a man joining such a society does not see himself as part of the common herd. Such a life style and philosophy of life places him above the common person. Membership in such a party could be motivated by true religious zeal--an ardent desire to be pleasing to God--which certainly would be laudable. However, human nature being what it is, people may often be motivated to embrace such a religious life from reasons of personal pride. They do not wish to be identified with the masses which they often despise. Membership in such a community sustains their personal esteem and supports their self-delusions. Their "holy life" does not lead them closer to God, but only separates them more deeply from other human beings and from a true evaluation of themselves. Jesus describes such persons in His Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the temple. Luke prefaced the parable with: *He then spoke this parable addressed to those who believed in their own self-righteousness while holding everyone else in contempt (Lk. 18:9).*

The Pharisees were probably the descendants of the Hasideans, a religious party which existed during the Maccabean era. The name *Hasidean* comes from *hasid* meaning *devout or pious*. The Maccabean period began around 175 B.C., and lasted until Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem in 63 B.C. It resulted from the Jews' rebellion against the domination and persecution of the Seleucid kings who ruled in the aftermath of Alexander the Great's conquest. At the time of the Maccabean revolt we are told: "*Then they were joined by a group of Hasideans, valiant Israelites, all of them devout followers of the law (I Mac. 2:42).*" These men belonged to a synagogue referred to as the "synagogue of the Hasideans." These men accepted only the Torah as their rule of life. They resisted foreign rule and fought for independence so that Israel could be a theocracy--ruled solely by the Torah. The Hasideans hitched their hopes to the Maccabeans and supported them in war. Through the treachery of a fellow Jew, Alcimus, sixty Hasideans were murdered in one day (see I Mac. 6:12-16). Later, when the descendants of the Maccabeans became too secular and political, the Hasideans withdrew their support from them

and remained a religious party politically opposed to the ruling government. Josephus, the Jewish historian, makes no mention of the Hasideans, but he mentions the Pharisee party as existing between 135-104 B.C. Seemingly, the Hasideans appear in later history as the Pharisee party—at least, the spirit of the Hasideans continues in the Pharisee party.

According to Josephus, the Pharisees had a history of political opposition—“....*greatly opposing kings....a cunning sect they were, and given to open fighting and doing mischief.*” They refused to give public allegiance to Caesar and his government after the Roman occupation in 63 B.C. However, by the time of Christ, they were generally more acceptable to the Romans since the Romans permitted them free exercise of their religion. Their traditional opposition to foreign control was kept alive by an extreme sect of the Pharisees called *Zealots* whom Josephus described as being fiercely dedicated to political freedom, fearlessly opposed to Roman rule, and adamantly determined to recognize only Yahweh as Lord and King.

The Pharisees of the gospel times were the proud inheritors of this honorable Hasidean heritage. At the time of Herod the Great, they were reported to number about six thousand. There is no reason to believe they would have been any fewer in number in Jesus' day. From Josephus who had himself been a Pharisee, we learn a good deal about this religious party. His information gives us a deeper insight into the nature and character of men who ardently opposed Jesus.

The general goal for a member of the Pharisee party was to become a holy man of God. As Josephus expressed it, “*to be righteous men and to do all those things which made them pleasing to God.*” Faith and reason guided the Pharisees in the fulfillment of their spiritual ambitions. Josephus said, “*They follow the conduct of reason and whatever that (good sense and intelligence) revealed to them as good that they do.*” Educated Jews were constantly being influenced by Hellenistic culture and philosophy. Even though the Pharisees despised these foreign influences, they were not completely immune to them. They shared, with the Greeks, an appreciation for the human mind--its powers and capabilities. Seemingly, their approach to God's Will and Law was directed more by reason than by faith. Through their faith they came to the substance of God's Will by accepting the Torah as the revealed Will of Yahweh. However, their interpretation of this Will rested upon their reasoning powers more than upon prayer and inspiration. Certain men within the Jewish culture were trained and skilled in the knowledge of the

Torah. These were recognized as lawyers or scribes. These lawyers applied reason to revelation and deduced, as reasonable and logical deductions, many corollaries and interpretations of the laws. In their interpretations of revelation, they carried it far beyond the sense of the Scriptures. These interpretations became recognized as a sacred and protective "hedge" about the Torah, the observance of which guaranteed the fulfillment of the law. Josephus spoke of the Pharisees as being men:

*...who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe that they were highly favored by God.*

He went on to say:

*....that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses.*

As far as the common man goes, he would have been unable to distinguish between the law of God and the interpretations and additions of the scribes. What was important in the minds of the Pharisees was the observance of all these rules and regulations that they equated with the Torah. They felt that if men guarded the traditions of the ancients, they would adhere to the letter of the divinely revealed Scriptures and thus be assured of righteousness before God. That was the matter of importance. However, the Pharisees ended with a legal, rationalized religion, devoid of true religious spirit. The spirit and heart of God had been reasoned out of religion.

It appears from the teachings of Josephus that the Pharisees did maintain a balanced doctrine between freedom of will of mankind and the Will of God--referred to as *fate*--the unalterable, preordained Will of God for mankind. They maintained that the Will of God found expression in human freedom in such a manner that men freely acted virtuously or viciously. Josephus describes the belief in these words:

*Now the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are under fate, but are not caused by fate....They determine that all things are done by fate, but they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit; since their notion is that it has*

*pleased God to make a temperament (a human nature), whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of man can act virtuously or viciously.*

Such a belief would also affect one's idea of divine reward and punishment. Josephus also revealed:

*They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishment, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again on account of which doctrines they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices they perform them according to their direction.*

We also learn that the Pharisees were directed by reason to live simplicity of life: "*They live simply and despise delicacies of diet,*" writes Josephus. He also notes their respect for the elderly: "*They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in anything which they have introduced.*"

The Pharisees however, were not the only intelligent and knowledgeable people among the Jews. There were men who belonged to the leading priestly families and the families of great wealth and political influence who were trained in both Hebrew and Hellenistic thought. Josephus said of them: "*....they think it an instance of virtue to dispute with those teachers of philosophy whom they frequent.*" These men rejected and opposed the teachings of the Pharisees. Josephus writes of them:

*....(they) say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the traditions of our forefathers.*

We also know these men accepted only the first five books of the Bible as inspired. They rejected the prophets. These men formed the religious party called the *Sadducees*. In opposition to the Pharisees, the Sadducees taught, in the words of Josephus:

*But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of anything besides what the law enjoins upon them—The Sadducees take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at the disposal of fate; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power, so that we are ourselves the causes of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly.*

The Sadducees were the only party of power which opposed the Pharisees, even though they possessed only wealth and political influence on their side. The people had no respect for the Sadducees and rejected their teachings and leadership. Josephus observed:

*The Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the respect and obedience of the populace....They are able to do almost nothing of themselves; for when they become magistrates, as they are unwillingly and by force sometimes obliged to be, they follow the teachings of the Pharisees, because the multitudes would not otherwise bear them.*

Josephus makes it clear where the power with the people lies. He recorded that the Pharisees received great attention from the city dwellers because “*of their virtuous conduct, both in their action and in their speech.*” Josephus goes on to declare:

*The Pharisees have the multitudes on their side....These have so great a power over the multitude, that when they say any thing against the king, or against the high priest they are presently believed.*

The Torah prescribed many precepts to be observed and the scribes continued to add to them. These lawyers insisted upon the same exact observance of their legislations as on those of the Torah. They had a saying: “*It is only Satan and man’s evil nature that rise up any objections against the teachings of the wise.*” In their minds, if a person violated the least important religious precept, it was equivalent to rejecting the Torah—spurning God’s yoke. It was an external infidelity manifesting the irreligion and rebellion of the heart against Yahweh. These lawyers were especially concerned about the Sabbath rest, ritual cleanliness, regulations concerning food and circumcision. Around all of these, they constructed a massive “*hedge.*”



Since the keeping of the Sabbath was such an important point of controversy between the Pharisees and Jesus, we will consider the Sabbath obligation as an example of how a precept of Scripture developed and changed under scribal interpretation. Historians are not in agreement as to the origin of the Sabbath rest. Some suggest it originated in the astronomy of the Babylonians and developed from Luna feast. The observance of the Sabbath did become of great importance during the Jews' exile in Babylon. After their return to the Promised Land, they continued to observe its pious customs and by the Maccabean period, it was considered a very serious offense not to keep the Sabbath. The Roman Tacitus even accused the Jews of honoring Saturn by their Sabbath rest and maintained they took cold food that day in honor of the cold planet Saturn. Even among the scribes there was a saying: "*The Sabbath, like circumcision, is anterior to the Law.*" Regardless of its origin, it became a day so honored and sacred among the Jews that the Romans exempted the Jews from military service because of it. The custom of Sabbath rest became a consecrated and holy day for the Jew because it was legislated so in the Scriptures. We read in Exodus:

*Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, your God. No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you....the Lord has blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

*Ex. 20:8-11*

It was a day to "*be refreshed (Ex. 23:12).*" "*You must rest even during the seasons of plowing and harvesting (Ex. 34:21).*" The seriousness of the obligation is expressed in Yahweh's words to Moses:

*You must also tell the Israelites: Take care to keep my Sabbaths, for that is to be the token between you and me throughout the generations, to show that it is I, the Lord, who make you holy. Therefore, you must keep the Sabbath as something sacred. Whoever desecrates it shall be put to death. If anyone does work on that day, he must be rooted out of his people.*

*Ex. 31:12-14*

We also read in Numbers that an Israelite was discovered gathering wood on the Sabbath day and he was ordered to be stoned to death (Num. 15:32-36).

In Hebrew, the word *Sabbath* denotes rest from all sorts of work. Josephus wrote:

*And the seventh day we set apart from labor; it is dedicated to the learning of our customs and laws, we think it proper to reflect on them, as well as on any good thing—in order to our avoiding sin.*

The Sabbath began at twilight on Friday. The rabbis maintained that it began when three stars appeared in the sky. When the first star appeared the *hazzan* took the trumpet from the synagogue and went upon the roof of the tallest building and blew two notes three times. After the appearance of the first star, he blew two notes to warn those in the field to cease their labors; with the appearance of the second star, he blew two notes to warn merchants to close their shops; with the appearance of the third star, he blew the last two notes to signal the moment for lighting the Sabbath lamp. At this moment, it was said: "*The Sabbath has begun to shine.*" The little yellow flames became a silent expression of Israel's faith. After the lamps were lit, all would sit down to a meal of wine and aromatic herbs. Nothing would be eaten again until after the Sabbath morning service. Mid-afternoon meal was taken and the main Sabbath meal was eaten about five in the evening. It lasted until the trumpet blew announcing the end of the Sabbath. Then all would rise, wash their hands, and thanksgiving was offered, over a cup of wine, which completed the Sabbath rest.

The oldest regulations within the Scriptures (Ex. 23:12) base the prohibition of work on humanitarian considerations--it is good for man and beast to rest from labor every seven days. Before the return of the Israelites from exile, the Sabbath was a feast of joy (see Nos. 2:13), "*a delight (Is. 58:13).*" After the exile, Nehemiah insisted upon a strict observance of the Sabbath rest (see Neh. 13:15-22). The nature of the Sabbath rest became the subject of much legal legislation. The scribes enumerated thirty-nine types of work which were prohibited on this day. The number "39" symbolized a boundless quantity--an unknowable amount.

The list of forbidden works included lighting a fire, sowing, carrying objects, tying or untying a knot, seizing any prey, and writing two letters of the alphabet. A physician was not permitted to assist a sick man on the Sabbath unless the man was in danger of death. Some prohibitions which appeared

very petty were: clapping the hands, jumping, slapping the thigh, and visiting the sick. One could walk only a Sabbath day's journey from one's home--2000 cubits (about 3000 feet or 3/4 of a mile).

The keeping of the Sabbath became so rigorous that it even became a threat to human life and the survival of the nation. In the time of the Maccabees, a thousand Jewish soldiers permitted themselves to be killed by the Syrians rather than take up arms and violate the Sabbath. When Jerusalem was under siege by Pompey in 63 B.C., the defenders of the city left the wall the moment the star of the Sabbath appeared in the evening sky. According to Josephus, the Romans refrained from recruiting the Jews into the army lest, at the sound of the *hazzan's* trumpet, they lay down their swords and shields. As a result of this, the more reasonable scribes agreed that it was legitimate to fight in self-defense on the Sabbath. It was permitted to help a man, or even an animal, in danger of his life. The Essenes however, maintained it was better to let a man or animal drown rather than violate the Sabbath. But, to kill an animal was forbidden. The question was asked "*What about a louse?*" One could not kill the louse but a more liberal minded scribe would permit you to remove its legs.

It was amidst such a rationalist and legalistic background that the Pharisees of the gospel era developed. Law and the observance of it were over-emphasized. An overemphasis of a truth or good often destroys the delicate balance within that truth or good and can automatically cause much harm to the cause of that same truth or good. Balanced goodness always suffers when things are carried to extremes. When these extremes become incarnated within human personalities, within religious or political parties, much damage often occurs within human society--what has been called "man's inhumanity to man." Many social injustices occur and many human rights are violated all in the name of truth, goodness, and most often, in the names of God and religion.

During Jesus' life on earth, the extremes were firmly entrenched and incarnated in Israel. The party of the Pharisees represented the religious Traditionalist, and the party of the Sadducees represented the religious Liberals. They were in deadly opposition to one another, an opposition which had long since destroyed any opportunity for mutual respect, love, and brotherhood. Two divided spirits within the same house will eventually cause the house to fall apart. In the end, their divisiveness succeeded in destroying the Jewish Nation.

Into this environment Jesus of Nazareth appears. This Jesus incarnates *shalom*--truth, goodness, and beauty all harmoniously blended to perfection. Jesus' very being and the influence of His personality within Jewish society equally threatened the Pharisees and Sadducees. Being an alternative to black and white, the light and power He emanated caused mental confusion and loss of emotional tranquility. The righteousness of the members was being called into question by His presence. The presence of Jesus erased the distinctive lines between the two extremes to the confusion of both troops. We see this truth illustrated when the temple guards failed to arrest Jesus as instructed by the religious authorities. John records:

*When the temple guards came back, the chief priests and Pharisees asked them, "Why did you not bring him in?" "No man ever spoke like that before," the guards replied. "Do not tell us you too have been taken in!" the Pharisees retorted. "You do not see any of the Sanhedrin believing in him do you? Or the Pharisees? Only this lot, that knows nothing about the law--and they are lost anyway!"*

*Jn. 7:45-49*

Ancient and natural enemies, the Traditional Pharisees and the Liberal Sadducees were able to momentarily put aside their differences in the face of a common enemy--Jesus of Nazareth. Once He was removed, their own battle ground would once more be sharply defined. Each side could then rest securely in its own self righteousness.

In Paul of Tarsus, we have an excellent example of the type of religious spirit produced by the Pharisaic spirit. Paul said of himself: *"I am a Pharisee and was born a Pharisee (Acts 23:16)."* Before King Agrippa he confirmed: *"They (the Jews) have been acquainted with me for a long time and can testify, if they wish, to my life lived as a Pharisee, the strictest sect of our religion (Acts 26:5)."* We see from the Scriptures what kind of man this environment produced. The Acts clearly reveal Paul's violent and unjust reaction to the disciples of Jesus which was an indirect attack upon Jesus and His principles:

*Saul, for his part, concurred in the act of killing....After that, Saul began to harass the Church. He entered house after house, dragged men and women out and threw them into jail.*

*Acts 8:1,3*

Let us hear Paul's own testimony:

*For my part, I once thought it my duty to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazorean in every way possible. That is just what I did in Jerusalem. With the authority I received from the chief priests, I sent many of God's holy people to prison. When they were to be put to death I cast my vote against them. Many a time, after synagogue, I compelled them by force to blaspheme. Indeed, so wild was my fury against them that I pursued them even to foreign cities. Acts 26:9-11*

All of this gives us a glimpse of the environment into which Jesus enters and works. Remember, Jesus is not a product of this earthly environment; He is a product of the Holy Spirit. As His mother heard: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God (Lk. 1:35)."* At His baptism, a voice from heaven was heard to say: *"You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests (Lk. 3:22)."* Luke relates: *"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, then returned from the Jordan... (Lk. 4:1)."* In Jesus, the Spirit of God described as *"gentle and humble of heart,"* encounters the spirit of man, the religious spirit of man—indeed a spirit perverted and contaminated by human sinfulness. In Jesus all mankind begins again in the understanding of God! In Jesus, a person truly accepts or rejects the God that is!

### THE SABBATH CONTROVERSY

Matthew demonstrates the distinction between the religious spirit of man and the religious spirit of God's own Son. He demonstrates this difference with two incidents which occur on the Sabbath.

In the first incident, Jesus and His disciples are making a Sabbath-day journey to the synagogue. They pass through a grain field. No one has eaten since the evening before. Some of the disciples pull off some of the ears of grain—shuck them by rubbing them in their hands and then eat the kernels of grain. Probably, it was simply an automatic and thoughtless gesture on the part of hungry men. Nevertheless, some of the Pharisees who were presently keeping Jesus under close observation, noticed this action. It was indeed a violation of the Sabbath. Obviously, these disciples of Jesus are ignorant of the law, but as always, ignorance is no excuse before the law. They have violated the law and sinned.

To the Pharisees, conscious awareness of breaking a law is not necessary in order to be guilty of sin. Merely breaking the law constitutes the sin. Apparently, to the mind of the Pharisees, Jesus tolerates this behavior. If He is a teacher of righteousness, He has an obligation to correct His disciples. Since He fails to do so, the Pharisees step in. They protest to Jesus: "*See here! Your disciples are doing what is not permitted on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:1).*" Jesus responds to this accusation by challenging their interpretation of the law. With examples from Scripture and present temple practice, Jesus demonstrates that precedents already exist which support the truth that the religious regulations are subject to the practical needs of human beings and to the practical demands of divine worship. Jesus retorts:

*Have you not read what David did when he and his men were hungry, how he entered God's house and ate the holy bread, a thing forbidden to him and his men or anyone other than priests? Have you not read in the law how the priests on temple duty can break the Sabbath rest without incurring guilt? I assure you, there is something greater than the temple here. If you understand the meaning of the text, "It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned these innocent men. The Son of Man is indeed Lord of the Sabbath.*

*Mt. 12:3-8*

In the case of David and his men, it was the high priest Ahimelech who allowed the dispensation from the law in the face of the common human need of hunger. The priests in the temple are dispensed from the Sabbath regulation because their service is given to the Lord. The Pharisees are looking at the law and not at the human need. They are not concerned about human need. Jesus insinuates that their zeal for the law has made them merciless. The tables are turned upon them. Jesus declares the disciples to be not only sinless, but also unjustly accused of sin. He accuses the Pharisees of the sin of false accusation. He seeks to place the Sabbath observance back into its proper perspective: the Sabbath is for man and not man for the Sabbath. It is a time given for physical rest and recognition and worship of God who physically sustains them and makes them holy.

These sinful Pharisees imply the sinfulness of Jesus. He rejects their implication. He implies that His own Person is more sacred and holy than any temple. What can be done without sin in the service of the temple can certainly be done in the service of One greater than the temple. The disciples were in the service of God's own Son. As high priest Ahimelech had exempted

men from divine ordinances, Jesus declares what is unbearable to the ears of the Pharisees: *“The Son of Man is indeed Lord of the Sabbath (Mk.2:28).”* By such a statement Jesus declares Himself to be above the Sabbath.

Jesus demonstrates his lordship over the Sabbath when he reaches the synagogue. There is a man present in the synagogue with a shriveled hand. The Pharisees decide to use the man as a test case: *“... and they put this question to Jesus.... ‘Is it lawful to work a cure on the Sabbath’ (Mt. 12:10).”* Their motive is impure as they do not seek knowledge from Jesus but evidence against Him. They believe that curing an illness is the practice of medicine which was forbidden on the Sabbath unless the sick person was in danger of death. Once again with His response, Jesus tries to show the Pharisees how wrong they are in their attitude towards the Sabbath observance. Jesus argues logically from the lesser to the greater. The Pharisees accept as licit to rescue one’s animal on the Sabbath, but they are unwilling to extend aid to a suffering and afflicted human being. To their question Jesus responded:

*“Suppose one of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath. Will he not take hold of it and pull it out? Well, think how much more precious a human being is than a sheep. Clearly, good deeds may be performed on the Sabbath.” To the man he said, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so and it was perfectly restored; it became as sound as the other.*  
*Mt. 12:11-13*

These very religious men experienced no joy over the mercy extended to the afflicted man. They had more concern for animals than for human beings. In these Sabbath episodes, Jesus teaches that it is not wrong for people to attend to their basic needs on the Sabbath nor is it wrong to extend aid to those in need. It is always right--in all places and at all times--to do good to others.

The Scriptures manifest what bitter fruit such a religious spirit can produce in men. The Pharisees are totally blinded to their own spiritual condition. They accuse Jesus of sin because He defends basic human rights and teaches the moral obligation to do good on the Sabbath. These very men who accused Him of immoral behavior because He did good, now come together and plot murder on the Sabbath:

*When the Pharisees were outside they began to plot against him to find a way to destroy him. Jesus was aware of this, and so he withdrew from that place.*  
*Mt. 12:15-15*

## MOMENT OF CRISIS

Israel's rejection of Jesus now awaits nothing but finalization. It has hardened its heart against the Messiah. In the face of this hostility, Jesus assumes a prudent and cautious attitude towards the Jews and the exercise of His ministry. Jesus knows He must die, but it will not be in Galilee. Hostility now makes it impossible for Him to enter into "*their synagogues,*" so He centers His ministry within the country areas, avoiding the crowded cities in order to lessen the danger of an attempt upon His life. When the time is right, He will walk into the camp of the enemy. He will willingly lay His life down--it will not be taken away from Him.

At this moment of crisis, Matthew seemingly pauses within his narration to clarify important points. Hatred and rejection does not alter Jesus' essential attitude towards His people. He continues His mission of mercy and moves among them as their savior: *Many people followed him and he cured them all, though he sternly ordered them not to make public what he had done. This was to fulfill what had been said through Isaiah the prophet.... (Mt. 12:16-17).*

At this time Jesus desires no messianic recognition for His works. The popular idea of the Messiah was not in keeping with the role Jesus must now fulfill. He demanded they remain silent concerning the healings received. Messianic publicity would only cause greater confusion and disturbance which Jesus seeks prudently to avoid. He needs a particular climate in which to complete His work.

Matthew loosely quotes a prophecy from the prophet Isaiah, which confirms that the Messianic role assumed by Jesus of Nazareth is in keeping with the Will of God. This prophecy of Isaiah indicates the direction that the life and the mission of Jesus will now be directed:

*Here is my servant whom I have chosen, my loved one in whom I delight. I will endow him with my spirit and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not contend or cry out, nor will his voice be heard in the streets. The bruised reed he will not crush; the smoldering wick he will not quench until judgment is made victorious. In his name, the Gentiles will find hope. Mt. 12:18-21*



The reference to the chosen and beloved servant of God recalls the baptism of Jesus--the beginning when He accepted His mission. At this moment of crisis, it is all reconfirmed. The Greek word for *servant* is *pais* and it can equally be translated *son*. Jesus is the beloved Son who continues to manifest within His mission the compassion of the heavenly Father. In the face of bitter disappointment, the hatred and rejection of Israel, Jesus neither alters His mission nor His heart. He continues in gentleness and humility. He will not conquer this world through the might of arms, or through any other secular means, but by the power of His Holy Spirit. With the spiritually weak, He will be gentle so that the bruised reed will not be crushed. With those within whom divine faith and love faintly flickers, He will deal prudently so that "the smoldering wick" of their spirit will not die. This is His policy. He will never alter it in this world, for it alone reflects the heart of God.

Israel's rejection of Jesus points the direction in which His mission must be directed. In obedience to God's will, Jesus turns to the Gentiles to whom the fullness of divine truth will be declared. This mission will continue until the divine truth achieves complete victory within the world. The Messiah whom the Jews despise will become the Hope of the Gentiles.

The application of Isaiah's prophecy to Jesus reveals something more about the mission of Jesus. It also indicates the means by which it will be achieved. This Servant of Yahweh appearing in Isaiah is a man destined to suffer:

*...Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear....Because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; And he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.*

*Is. 53:11-12*

Seemingly, Matthew returns to an incident mentioned in Chapter Nine but was not developed at that point. There the Pharisees proclaimed for the first time, in the face of the people's enthusiastic reaction to Jesus, their most damning opinion of Him. There we read:

*As they were leaving, suddenly some people brought him a mute who was possessed by a demon. Once the demon was expelled, the mute began to speak to the great surprise of the crowds. "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel!" they exclaimed. But the Pharisees were saying, "He casts out demons through the prince of demons."*

*Mt 9:32-34*

## JESUS AND BEELZEBUL

What Matthew now records is similar to what was written in Chapter Nine. Apparently, Jesus responded earlier to this most serious accusation but Matthew moved the response to the "back burner" to be presented at a more opportune time. Matthew writes:

A possessed man who was brought to him was blind and mute. He cured the man so that he could speak and see. All in the crowd were astonished. "*Might this not be David's son?*" they asked. When the Pharisees heard this, they charged, "*This man can expel demons only with the help of Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mt. 12:22-24).*"

We see that the people are on the verge of accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Upon their messianic enthusiasm, the Pharisees pour the cold water of their vicious accusation. The Pharisees seek to turn the people in exactly the opposite direction--away from Jesus. Remember the teaching of Josephus--these Pharisees had great influence over the common people. The people respected and venerated them as their reliable religious guides and teachers.

Their accusation is most deadly and gravely sacrilegious. Jesus accomplishes all His works under the inspiration and through the power of the Holy Spirit. In reality, the heavenly Father works through Him. But, the Pharisees identify these works as being inspired and empowered by Satan. They attribute what is of the Holy Spirit to be the product of the unholy spirit. The works of the Father are identified as the works of Satan. Jesus once said: "*And if your light is darkness, how deep will the darkness be (Mt. 6:23)!*" In this incident we have an example of the depths of darkness. It borders upon blasphemy of the Holy Spirit!

The Pharisees accused Jesus of being a magician in league with Satan. The word *Beelzebub* means *Baal the prince*, or as translated by some *lord of the house*. The word appears only once in the Old Testament, in 2 Kgs. 1:2-6. The name implies Satan to be the lord of the kingdom of darkness. All the possessed people were within this kingdom and under the will of this evil lord. To depose a human being was an act which freed one from the imprisonment and lordship of Satan. Jesus seeks logically to demonstrate the foolishness of the Pharisees' accusation. Knowing their thoughts, he said to them:

*A kingdom torn by strife is headed for its downfall. A town or household split into factions cannot last for long. If Satan is expelling Satan, he must be torn by dissension. How then, can his dominion last? If I expel demons with Beelzebub's help, by whose help do your people expel them? Let them be the ones to judge you. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I expel demons, then the reign of God has overtaken you. How can anyone enter a strong man's house and make off with his property unless he first ties him securely? Only then can he rob his house.*

*Mt. 12:25-29*

By His ministry, Jesus was actually exorcising Israel. It was being cleansed and set free. Satan was being expelled from the House of Israel. Such activity, on such a grand scale, weakened and despoiled the kingdom of Satan. Satan is both evil and intelligent. The only logical deduction is that Satan has met, in Jesus, one stronger than himself. Jesus appeals to the exorcists among the Jews to be His witnesses.

What did the Pharisees know about expelling demons? Ask the men who have had the experience in exorcism. Ask them what it takes to dispel evil spirits from the souls of men. They possessed elaborate rituals and prayers to aid in this ministry. They knew from personal experience how much time, energy, and power is needed to free souls from the power of demons. By a mere command or gesture, Jesus expelled unclean spirits. His ministry clearly manifested His superior power. From the evidence given by Jesus, the only logical and true estimation of His ministry is that in Jesus, the kingdom of God has come upon this earth. Jesus has overcome the evil one; he is securely bound and Jesus despoils his kingdom.

### WARNING TO HIS ENEMIES

After defending Himself, Jesus turns upon His accusers and solemnly warns them. He does not hesitate to declare the fullness of their evil spiritual state; they are in imminent danger of damnation, yet Jesus does not rob them of hope. Salvation is still possible. However, it implies accepting Jesus in faith. He cannot be by-passed on the way to God. Those endeavoring to do so will be lost. *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters (Mt. 12:30)."* The Pharisees have blasphemed against the Son of Man and by so doing, they have bordered upon blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Jesus sternly warns against this sin:

*That, I assure you, is why every sin, every blasphemy, will be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever says anything against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever says anything against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.* Mt. 12:31-32

The Son of God appeared upon this earth as meek and humble, and men will be forgiven for their failure to recognize His true nature. But the time will come when Israel will face the fact of His resurrection from the dead, and the Holy Spirit will clearly be poured out on His disciples, so that to continue to persist in unbelief and to attribute all this to the work of evil will be the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. Such a sin produces a spiritual condition which makes forgiveness impossible. Once again, we must emphasize that the reason for the unforgiveness of the sin rests in man and not in God. Apparently by such a sin a person closes himself off from the grace of repentance. Jesus solemnly declares the eternal reality of such a sinful condition.

Jesus confronts the hypocrisy of His enemies and demands the justice of being judged, at least, by His good works. *“Declare a tree good and its fruit good or declare a tree rotten and its fruit rotten, one or the other, for you can tell a tree by its fruit (Mt. 12:33).”* Jesus demands His works be reviewed and a decision be made--one is with Him or against Him. He will not accept a neutral position in this regard. He accuses them of having lost the ability to even discern goodness and to declare what is right and just:

*How can you utter anything good, you brood of vipers, when you are so evil? The mouth speaks whatever fills the mind. A good man produces good from his store of goodness; and evil man produces evil from his evil store. I assure you, on judgment day people will be held accountable for every unguarded word they speak. By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.* Mt. 12:34-37

Jesus warns people about their speech. From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Words are easy to form, but the damage they cause may be irreparable. Men spoke evil of Jesus and their words turned men away from their Savior and His salvation. Today they speak in like manner against His true Church, and turn people away from the salvation she offers. To undo the effect of evil speech is like trying to gather the feathers of a pillow scattered by

a powerful wind. Jesus warns people that they will be held accountable for the evil their words have produced.

### WITHOUT REPENTANCE

These enemies of Jesus had not come to faith through His miracles. They now requested a sign from Him that would completely expel all doubt in Him. We hear: "*Some of the scribes and Pharisees then spoke up, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see you work some signs' (Mt. 12:38).*" Jesus knows, because of the malice of their hearts, nothing will satisfy them. They do not lack signs--they lack repentance. They will receive the call to repentance and they will be given one sign, "*the sign of Jonah,*" His resurrection from the dead.

*An evil and unfaithful age is eager for a sign! No sign will be given it but that of the prophet Jonah. Just as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man spend three days and nights in the bowels of the earth. Mt. 12:39-40*

This is Jesus' first proclamation of His coming death.

As Peter later preached, signs had been given:

*Jesus the Nazorean was a man whom God sent to you with miracles, wonders, and signs as his credentials. These God worked through him in your midst, as you well know. Acts 2:22*

Once again, Jesus compares Israel to pagan people. The citizens of Nineveh repented at the preaching of the prophet Jonah. Israel failed to repent and one greater than Jonah preached to them. The Queen of Sheba, queen of the South, came seeking wisdom at the feet of Solomon. Israel rejected wisdom

from one greater than Solomon. On the day of Judgment, these pagans will bear witness against Israel: "*....because you failed to recognize the time of your visitation (Lk. 19:44).*"

In a little parable, Jesus reveals the present state of Israel and gives a warning about its future:

*When the unclean spirit departs from a man, it roams through arid wastes searching for a place of rest and finding none. Then it says, "I will go back where I came from," and returns to find the dwelling place unoccupied, though swept and tidied now. Off it goes again to bring back with it this time seven spirits more evil than itself. They move in and settle there. Thus, the last state of the man becomes worse than the first. And that is how it will be with this evil generation.*

*Mt. 12:43-45*

The ministry of Jesus has freed Israel from the power of Satan. However if Israel fails to acknowledge that the Spirit of God has come to Israel in Jesus and refuses to accept Jesus, Israel is destined for great evil. The fullness of evil will come upon Israel. One has but to read the account of Josephus of the last days of Jerusalem, before the Romans entered it in 70 A.D., to realize what a Hell-hole Jerusalem became prior to its destruction by the Romans.

The Pharisees' rejection of Jesus surfaces again the vital importance of repentance in the economy of salvation. Many Jews in Jesus' day rested spiritually secure in the knowledge of being a descendant of Abraham. Early within this gospel narrative, John the Baptist warned both the Pharisees and the Sadducees on the necessity to reform:

*Do not pride yourselves on the claim, "Abraham is our father," I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these very stones.*

*Mt. 3:9*

Being a Jew was not going to automatically ensure one a membership in the Messianic Kingdom. It would demand a faith-commitment to the Messiah. Many people were reluctant to accept Jesus as the Messiah, they withheld their commitment to Him. One day, Jesus used an incident in His life to teach the crowd about the relationship between faith in Him as the Messiah, and membership in the messianic kingdom--membership in the Family of God. If "*the crowds*" are not careful, they will be left standing out in the cold and darkness--excluded from the messianic banquet. He was still addressing the crowd when his mother and his brothers appeared outside to speak with him. Someone said to him:

*"Your mother and your brothers are standing out there and they wish to speak to you." He said to the one who had told him, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then, extending his hand*

*toward his disciples, he said, "There are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me."*

*Mt. 12:46-50*

This incident does not imply that the relatives of Jesus are excluded from the messianic kingdom. It implies that natural kinship, even one as close as the natural mother of the Messiah, is not the foundation for membership in the Messianic Community. The only foundation is obedience to the Father's Will. As for Mary, we know from Luke's account, she was the first to believe in and follow the Messiah and to sing "*my spirit finds joy in God my savior.*" Jesus gestures towards His disciples and identifies them as His family. Those who become His disciples fulfill the Will of God. They are the beginning of the Messianic Community and members of the family of the Messiah. Obedience to the Father's Will is the foundation for membership in the Community whose members enjoy eternal life in God and which assures a person a reserved seat at the Messianic Banquet.

## CHAPTER 14

### JESUS TEACHES IN PARABLES

#### INTRODUCTION

As mentioned earlier, we have come to the turning point in Jesus' ministry, mission and life. Previously Jesus said: "*Blest is the man who finds no stumbling block in me (Mt. 11:6).*" Such people become "*blest*" because they will enter the kingdom of God. They overcame any difficulty in beholding Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel and, in faith, accepting Him into their lives. These "*blest*" people constitute the true kingdom of God on earth. They accept into their lives the expressed, the incarnate, and the living Will of God--Jesus Christ. The Jews who will not accept Jesus as the Messiah stumble on the way to their salvation. He is a stumbling block to them. However since God has established Jesus as both the Way and the Gate into the kingdom--to reject Jesus is to lose both the Way to God and the Entrance into God's life. A rejected Jesus becomes an impenetrable road block on the way to God: "*...no one comes to the Father but through me (Jn. 14:6).*"

From the baptism of Jesus up to the present point, Matthew has concentrated on the presentation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel. Jesus appears as possessing great authority in speech:

*The guards in the temple confessed, "No man ever spoke like that before....(Jn. 7:46)"; (Jesus) ....left the crowds spellbound at his teaching. The reason was that he taught with authority and not like their scribes (Mt. 7:28); ....A feeling of awe came over the crowd, and they praised God for giving such authority to men (Mt. 9:8).*

As witnesses to this authority, Matthew presented the testimony of John the Baptist, the appearance of God's Spirit above the head of Jesus in the form of a dove, the voice of the Father from heaven, and the works performed by Jesus. As Peter told the Jews:

*"...These God worked through him in your midst, as you well know (Acts 2:22)." The crowds responded: "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel (Mt. 9:32)!" "...Might this not be David's Son (Mt. 12:23)?"* Jesus appears in



Israel as “one greater” than Moses: “*The Son of Man is indeed Lord of the Sabbath (Mt. 12:8).*” And Lord of the Torah: “*You have heard the commandment imposed on your forefathers....But what I say to you is.... (Mt. 5:38-39).*”

At the high-watermark of Jesus’ ministry Matthew presents John the Baptist asking Jesus—“*Are you He who is to come.... (Mt. 11:3).*” This incident is used to demonstrate that what had previously occurred in the ministry of Jesus, recorded within the first ten chapters of the Gospel, had fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. These fulfilled prophecies, of the Old Testament add their voice to the authority of Jesus’ messianic ministry.

Jesus opened the eyes of the blind and they could see Him; Jesus unstopped the ears of the dumb and they could understand Him. However in Israel, many eyes remained blind and many ears closed to Jesus’ messianic claim. Spiritual blindness and deafness reach a climax in Chapters Eleven and Twelve. The leaders among the people hardened their hearts in disbelief. They refused to accept Jesus’ interpretation of the law and His revelation of God. They rejected the Spirit and Person of God, appearing within Jesus. With two examples of the interpretation of religious observances, Matthew demonstrated the drastic distinction between the Spirit of Jesus and the spirit of the Jewish people. The spirit of His opponents appears merciless—as spirits alien to compassion and pity. These people stand out in stark contrast to Jesus of Nazareth who appears “*....gentle and humble of heart. (Mt. 11:29).*” The words of Jesus imply that He has replaced the Mosaic Law when He says “*Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn of me.... (Mt. 11:29).*” As we know “yoke” symbolized, for the Jews, the Mosaic Law.

In general, as the people fail to respond properly to the ministry of Jesus,-He commences to warn them of their coming condemnation:

*It will go ill with you, Chorazin! And just as ill with you  
Bethsaida....Capernaum....You shall go down to the realm of death!  
If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Sodom, it would be  
standing today. Mt. 11:21,23*

This rejection of Jesus among the people reached its high-watermark with the accusations of the scribes and Pharisees, “*....He casts out demons through the prince of demons (Mt. 9:34),*” and with “*....This man can expel demons only with the help of Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mt. 12:24).*”

The appearance of Jesus within Israel becomes judgment itself. The reaction of people to Jesus reveals their inner spirit. Those who reject Him reveal themselves to be condemned; those who accept Him reveal themselves to be saved:

*Whoever believes in him avoids condemnation, but whoever does not believe is already condemned for not believing in the name of God's only Son. The judgment of condemnation is this: the light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked. Everyone who practices evil hates the light; he does not come near it for fear his deeds will be exposed. But he who acts in truth comes into the light, to make clear that his deeds are done in God.*  
Jn. 3:18-21

Jesus continues to pursue the hearts of people as long as there remains doubt and uncertainty, but when their hearts become hardened and their wills become confirmed against Him, Jesus leaves them to their end--freely self-willed. Energy is exerted to turn people from Him: "You do not see any of the Sanhedrin believing in him do you? Or the Pharisees? Only this lot, that knows nothing about the law--and they are lost anyway (Jn. 7:48-49)!" Their disbelief culminated into hatred and contempt of Jesus and found expression in their malicious desire to destroy Him: "When the Pharisees were outside they began to plot against him to find a way to destroy him. Jesus was aware of this....(Mt. 12:14-15)." From this moment on it is a real war. Jesus changes His tactics. He teaches:

*Declare a tree good and its fruit good or declare a tree rotten and its fruit rotten, one or the other, for you can tell a tree by its fruits.*  
Mt. 12:33

Jesus looked at the fruits produced by the people and He practices what He preaches. He judges Israel to be a rotten tree. He promulgates His findings. It is "...an evil and unfaithful age (Mt. 12:39)," "...a perverse lot (Mt. 17:17)." On that day of final judgment Israel will stand condemned:

*At the judgment, the citizens of Nineveh will rise with the present generation and be the ones to condemn it...At the judgment, the queen of the South will rise with the present generation and be the one to condemn it.*  
Mt. 12:41-42

The House of Israel, composed of this condemned generation, now moves rapidly toward its terrible destiny--a house possessed, full of evil.

As the old Israel is rejected, the New Israel is now acknowledged: "*Then, extending his hand toward his disciples, he said, '...There are my mother and brothers.... (Mt. 12:49-50).'*" He had taught—"You can tell a tree by its fruits (Mt. 12:33)," and He now identifies the good tree by its fruits. By so doing, Jesus confirms who has entered into the kingdom of God: "*Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me (Mt. 12:50).'*" Jesus implies that the Will of the Father has been fulfilled when people become His disciples. Such disciples constitute God's kingdom on earth. They have become, on earth, the House of God which will be filled with the Holy Spirit of God. The author of Hebrews wrote:

*....Moses, too, "was faithful in all God's household," but Jesus is more worthy of honor than he, as the founder of a house is more honorable than the house itself. Every house is founded by someone, but God is the founder of all. Moses "was faithful in all God's household" as a servant charged with the task of witnessing to what would be spoken; but Christ was faithful as the Son placed over God's house. It is we who are that house if we hold fast to our confidence and the hope of which we boast.* Heb. 3:2-6

The Scriptures imply that this generation of Jews, which rejected Jesus, can be compared to a rotten tree that produces evil fruit, and to a house possessed by evil spirits.

Jesus turns away from those who refuse "*to see*" and "*to hear,*" and He concentrates His attention upon His disciples--those whose eyes have been opened to see Him and whose ears have been unstopped to hear Him. He directs His time and energy towards strengthening them and completing their instruction, for they constitute the New Israel of God and will continue the spreading of the Lord's kingdom on earth.

Now that the members of God's kingdom have been identified, Jesus will proceed to develop the concept of God's kingdom on earth. The mysteries of the kingdom of God, treasures of knowledge, will be revealed to the disciples--the "*little ones,*" but those who are outside "*the house*" will be left in the darkness. Matthew symbolizes this by a change of Jesus' technique in addressing the crowds. At this point in Matthew's narration of the Gospel,

Jesus begins to speak in parables to the crowds. In the discourse to follow, Jesus will teach using seven different parables. This discourse is begun when the author relates:

*That same day, on leaving the house, Jesus sat down by the lakeshore. Such great crowds gathered around him that he went and took his seat in a boat while the crowd stood along the shore. He addressed them at length in parables, speaking in this fashion: "One day a farmer went out sowing. Part of what he sowed landed on a footpath, where birds came and ate it up. Part of it fell on rocky ground, where is had little soil. It sprouted at once since the soil had no depth, but when the sun rose and scorched it, it began to wither for lack of roots. Again, part of the seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked it. Part of it, finally, landed on good soil and yielded grain a hundred--or sixty--or thirty fold. Let everyone heed what he hears!"* Mt. 13:1-9

## PARABLES

As Matthew has presented Jesus' teaching ministry, this is a definite change in His teaching methods. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke plainly and was clearly understood. Now He reverts to an art form called the *parable*. For a better understanding of this section of the Gospel let us review the concept of the parable.

In the Greek language, the word *parable* expresses a comparison of one thing with another. In the Hebrew, such a literary form would fall under the heading of *meshal* which could be anything from a short proverb to a lengthy allegory by which means wisdom could be taught. The simplest explanation of a parable is to see it as an extended simile or metaphor. As we know in our language, a simile is a figure of speech in which we explicitly compare two different things, one to another, usually introduced with *like* or *as*. In the figure of speech called the *metaphor*, the comparison of one thing with another is implied and words of comparison are not used. A simile or metaphor presents a verbal picture that conveys a mental concept to another in a concrete and graphic manner. The power of these expressions to convey knowledge lies in the fact that they draw upon everyday experiences and familiarity to convey an idea that is not familiar.

When a teacher desires to express an abstract truth to a student, the creative mind of the teacher latches on to something familiar to the student, and compares the unknown thing to the known. The teacher hopes that the student's knowledge of the known will lead to his understanding of the unknown. Jesus taught with similes when He encouraged His disciples: "*You must be clever as snakes and innocent as doves (Mt. 10:16).*" He used a metaphor to describe His idea of Herod Antipas, "*Go tell that fox (Lk. 13:32).*" When a certain scribe asked Jesus, "*Who is my neighbor (Lk. 10:29),*" He did not give a long discourse on charity but rather related the tale of the Good Samaritan. In this concrete fashion the scribe not only learned who his neighbor was, but also the degree and depth of love demanded in being neighborly.

As stated before, the parable could be called an extended simile or metaphor that becomes a story in verbal pictures because of the added details, rather than a thought in a single verbal picture. However, the parable expresses a singular idea, as does the simile and metaphor. The added details are not intended to have independent meaning of their own as an allegory does. In such an art form as an allegory, all the details in the story are metaphors with special significance.

For many centuries, the spiritual writers and commentators, such as Origen and Augustine, treated all the parables in the Scriptures as allegories. The Hellenistic mind delighted in the subtleties of meaning found in an allegory. Some may have not been content with the simplicity of truth expressed in Our Lord's parables. In their commentaries on these parables, we were often being treated to man's flights of fancy rather than to inspired interpretation. However, they may have been encouraged in this direction because certain parables within the Scriptures are also treated as allegories. Some scholars maintain this was due more to the reflection of the early Church upon the parables than to Jesus' own personal teaching concerning them.

The parable was intended to be heard and not read. It was intended to affect the hearer the moment it was heard. Sometimes the point of the parable is blazingly clear. At other times its impact momentarily escapes awareness and then suddenly bursts forth, like a floodlight on a dark road. Or, it may resist discovery and try the mind--make it dig for its light. In the end, it is leading the hearer to grasp a particular point, and come to a judgment. Once the judgment has been made, it has a surprising

application on a different level. By seeing a truth on one level--often impersonal--one is brought through the parable to a conscious awareness of the same truth with a higher and more personal application. We have an excellent example of this in the Old Testament when the prophet Nathan, through a parable, brought David around to unconsciously condemn himself, and pass sentence upon himself.

When Jesus used this form of speech, it flowed as an automatic response within a concrete teaching situation. His creative mind pulls from personal experience a picturesque comparison familiar to His hearer, through which He conveys a truth of supernatural order. Jesus' use of the parable implies a relationship between the natural order and the supernatural. In relationship to man the supernatural appears to be an extension of the natural. There was an old saying among spiritual advisors: "*The supernatural builds upon the natural.*" This implies that the natural order is the foundation for the supernatural order (in a human being) and that supernatural life is so analogous to natural life that a known truth on one level can serve as light on the other level.

Certain modern scholars maintain that in the parables of Jesus we come the closest to the original teachings of Jesus--to that exact form in which His teachings were personally delivered. These parables have been referred to as a "*fragment of the original rock of tradition*" and as "*the most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ recorded in the Gospel.*" They insist that in order to hear the authentic voice of Jesus, the parable must be heard in the original setting in which it was created. They feel certain that the parables, in their present situation within the gospels, have been rearranged and revised by the evangelists for their own theological purposes. Therefore, the real power of Jesus' teaching is lost to us.

Perhaps it is a natural desire for men to want to know Jesus, using Paul's expression, "*in the flesh.*" It certainly would be of historical and academic interest to know the original settings that inspired the parables. It is generally agreed that a parable is best interpreted against the setting in which it was delivered and inspired--that it is best interpreted against the background in which it was created. Would such information however, be any more spiritually insightful and helpful than the present scriptural presentation of the parable?

We who believe in the divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures know that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the original utterances of Jesus, later inspired the evangelists' presentation of their material. Those who lament the loss of the historical Jesus under the early Church's "theologizing" of Jesus need to bear in mind that the early Church's experience of the historical Jesus was a Jesus risen from the dead. What Jesus came to be through His death and resurrection from the dead paled, in comparison, the previous experience of Jesus. The strongest stimulus stimulates. It is Jesus gloriously risen from the dead that the Church was commissioned to proclaim to the world. This is the Jesus the gospel proclaims.

The parable has often been used as a verbal weapon in time of controversy. It has been used to correct, reprove, and attack. As previously mentioned--Nathan used a parable to reprove King David. We also see Jotham, in Judges, confronting the citizens of Shechem with their crime through a parable. In such circumstances, the parable is not used without danger. It is

a means to force a truth upon peoples' conscious awareness--a truth that they may be unwilling to admit. This could result in a violent reaction within the hearer, and with dangerous consequences to the speaker.

In Judges, Jotham spoke his parable piece and quickly fled for his life. Later, we will see that the chief priests and Pharisees will be stirred to destroy Jesus. We read: "*When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard these parables, they realized he was speaking about them (Mt. 21:45).*"

If Jesus desired His hearers to draw spiritual insight from His parable, He would have expected them to come to it through their background knowledge of the Scriptures. For this reason, it has been suggested that the best guide in interpreting the parables of Jesus would be the Old Testament.

The setting for the first parable finds Jesus addressing the "*great crowds*" from His seat in the boat. The great crowds are upon the shore removed from Jesus who is in the boat. The effect of Jesus' teaching ministry is the background for this parable. For sometime now, Jesus spent much time and energy proclaiming to the people the kingdom of God--inviting people to enter it now. Despite all the labor, the great crowds remain unmoved--uncommitted to Jesus. We have seen that He was "*in the house,*" and they are "*outside the house.*" They desire Him to come out of "*the house*" and be where they are. Those who were in the house with Him are identified as

disciples. Now we see that He is in "*the boat*" and they are left on the shore. Few within the "*great crowds*" become His disciples--few enter His boat or His house. They will not enter the kingdom of God. However, despite all these obvious losses, a harvest of souls will be gathered. This is the point that the first parable makes. To properly interpret a parable one needs to listen to its closing line, the "punch line," in which lies the message of the tale.

At times, it will seem to the disciples that the labor is much and the harvest scarce. Jesus desires to encourage those laborers sent out to gather the harvest. If the Lord of the harvest has sent them into the fields, their labor will bear fruit. Sometimes they must work on in faith alone, assured of their success only by the word of the Lord.

The Gospel truth must be proclaimed to the entire world and the Lord commissioned His disciples to this task. It will fall anew upon each new generation of disciples to proclaim it in the entire world--in "*their world*."

Truth is power, and must be proclaimed in order to bear fruit. Many disciples of Jesus sin through imprudent silence. Truth is like good seed when it falls upon fertile ground--it may take time, but it will germinate. One never knows the effect of truth which is prudently spoken. One certainly knows what the effect will be if not spoken--Nothing! A person once showed a friend a bottle of rare seeds. He said, "*I've had these for over twenty-five years.*" Those seeds will never bear fruit in a jar. Many Christians, like that man, keep the seeds of divine truth sealed within the jars of their hearts. The Lord told His disciples:

*You are the light of the world...Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. They set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine before men.*

*Mt. 5:14-16*

In the Acts we read that when Paul came to Corinth, the Jews rejected his ministry there, "*...they opposed him and insulted him... (Acts 18:6).*" One night in a vision, the Lord said to Paul:

*"Do not be afraid. Go on speaking and do not be silenced, for I am with you. No one will attack you or harm you. There are many of my people in this city." Paul ended by settling there for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.*

*Acts 18:9-11*



Corinth--a sin filled city--was a most unlikely place to find many of the Lord's people. "*The Lord's people*" in Corinth probably did not realize they were "*the Lord's people*" until they heard the words of Paul and responded to them.

### THE ALLEGORY OF THE SOWER

Matthew leaves his readers in little doubt as to why Jesus spoke to the people in parables. He writes:

*When the disciples got near him, they asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered: "To you has been given knowledge of the mysteries of the reign of God, but it has not been given to the others. To the man who has, more will be given until he grows rich; the man who has not, will lose what little he has."*

*Mt. 13:10-12*

The disciples of Jesus are enriched by the use of their spiritual powers and blessings. As they exercise their powers in the ministry, the powers grow and increase. When powers and blessings are not exercised, when they lie dormant, they grow weak and atrophy. They are lost. Many are like octopi in the Church--they have eight arms to receive the ministries of the Body and not one with which to minister to it. They will lose what they have received. Jesus goes on to explain:

*I use parables when I speak to them because they look but do not see, they listen but do not hear or understand. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them which says: "Listen as you will, you shall not understand, look intently as you will, you shall not see." Sluggish indeed is this people's heart. They have scarcely heard with their ears, they have firmly closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn back to me, and I should heal them. Mt. 13:13-15*

Jesus' words imply that the problem is not with the eyes and the ears but with the heart. People have hardened their hearts against the grace of God which demands a repentance they are unwilling to embrace. The will that turns from God will be respected by God. It will be abandoned to the darkness it has chosen.

We know there was a strong belief among pious Jews in "fate"--in the preordained Will of God being expressed in the world and in the lives of people. Nothing comes to be that God has not Willed. We know the Pharisees sought some compromise between human freedom and fate. Nevertheless, when something mysterious occurred within the lives of men--they quickly attributed it to the Will of God. The Scriptures expressed this Will of God for the Jews.

The Jews' rejection of Jesus certainly troubled the early Jewish members of the Christian Community. This could only be explained by attributing it to the Divine Will. Paul expressed something of this when he wrote: "*blindness has come upon part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles enter in.... (Rm. 11:25).*" Paul attributed this blindness to the working of God: "*God has imprisoned all in disobedience that he might have mercy on all (Rm. 11:32).*" He supported this belief from the Scriptures:

*As Scripture says: "Behold, I am placing in Zion a stone to make men stumble and a rock to make them fall; but he who believes in him will not be put to shame."* *Rm. 9:33*

Isaiah cries out, referring to Israel, "*Though the number of the Israelites should be as the sands of the sea, only a remnant will be saved (Rm. 9:27).*"

The early Church, particularly, believed that all these which concerned the life of the Messiah had been foretold in the Scriptures. Obviously, they searched the Scriptures to verify all these things to have been willed by God. "*According to Scripture*" runs like a refrain through the New Testament.

Jesus told the disciples: "*....to you has been given knowledge of the mysteries of the reign of God, but it has not been given to others (Mt. 13:11).*" Paul said of this mystery, hidden from the ages, that the angels longed to look into it. In their knowledge of the kingdom, the disciples of Jesus possess a great treasure. He does not wish them to underestimate their treasure nor their obligation in possessing it. Jesus has placed before them heavenly pearls of wisdom. He teaches them:

*But blest are your eyes because they see and blest are your ears because they hear. I assure you, many a prophet and many a saint longed to see what you see but did not see it, to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.* *Mt. 13:16-17*

Paul later wrote:

*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts, that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us.*

*2Cor. 4:6-7*

Matthew goes on to relate that when the disciples separate from the great crowds and return to the house, Jesus explains to them the mystery of the acceptance and rejection of Him. He gives a psychological explanation for the effects of His ministry. As mentioned earlier, some scholars find difficulty with Jesus turning a parable into an allegory. It seems Jesus still fails to act the way people expect Him to. Certain scholars cannot be comfortable with the image of Jesus that is projected in the Scriptures. They have an academic itch to re-do it. It hardly seems characteristic that the disciples would not have sought some natural explanation for people's rejection of Jesus. The fact of it certainly puzzled them. They were the students of the man who knew the answer. As the evangelist John wrote of Jesus: "*He needed no one to give him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in man's heart (Jn. 2:25).*"

The parable of the sower now appears in the Gospel as an inspired allegory which explains, on the psychological level, people's reaction to Jesus Christ. Such a teaching one would have expected the disciples to have requested and received from Jesus. Jesus now says:

*Mark well, then, the parable of the sower. The seed along the path is the man who hears the message about God's reign without understanding it. The evil one approaches him to steal away what was sown in his mind. The seed that fell on patches of rock is the man who hears the message and at first receives it with joy. But he has no roots, so he lasts only for a time. When some setback or persecution involving the message occurs, he soon falters. What was sown among briars is the man who hears the message, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of money choke it off. Such a one produces no yield. But what was sown on good soil is the man who hears the message and takes it in. He it is who bears a yield of a hundred--or sixty--or thirty fold.*

*Mt. 13:18-23*

At the time of Our Lord it was customary for a farmer to sow the seed and then plow the field. The field was a composition of pathways, rocks, briars, and fertile soil. A lot of seed was sown and lost but enough fell upon good soil to reap a good harvest. This allegory expressed not only the ministry of Jesus but the ministry of the Church. Jesus teaches them these lessons, not merely to satisfy their curiosity, but to enlighten them so that they will be prudent and profitable evangelists.

The seed is identified in Mark simply as "*the word*," as "*the word of God*" in Luke, and as "*the message about God's reign*" in Matthew. In summary, we can say the seed symbolizes the Person of Jesus or, if one desires, the Gospel. Primarily, the Sower is Jesus Himself and secondarily the apostles and disciples of Jesus who act in His name.

We are told that three categories of people receive Jesus in vain. Their encounter with Him does not lead to salvation. The first category of people reject Jesus without even accepting Him. There is no preparation in their lives for their acceptance of Christ. The message is rejected out of ignorance. These people are left to the mercy of Satan and his agents--the world with its darkness. Jesus is dismissed from the lives of such people before they have the opportunity to realize who He is. Here the evangelist must note the need for a prudent presentation of Jesus to others. A person needs to be properly enlightened about Christ. It would be wise for the evangelist to know the basic need of the person and how Jesus relates to this need. Jesus must be seen as a value to the person. In a word--Jesus is truly the personal Savior of the person. The person needs the help of the disciple of Jesus to perceive this. In such a case, ignorance is the natural enemy and the supernatural enemy, the evil one, uses ignorance to his advantage. Here education, knowledge, and understanding are the weapons needed to root Christ into the mind and heart of a person.

In the next two cases, Jesus is accepted into the lives of both categories of people. In the second case--we have temporary conversion to Christ. All the evangelists agree that this begins with joy in Jesus and ends on a flat, disappointing note. Religious experience remains primarily in "the flesh." Its foundation remains mainly within religious feelings and emotions. We are told that when such people suffer any persecutions because of Jesus or the Gospel, they lose heart. Their hearts are not grounded within the spirit that could sustain their commitment when good religious feelings and emotions abandon them. Needless to say, they do not possess the heart to identify with

the suffering Jesus in this world--with a Jesus who brings sufferings rather than joy to them. They want no part in the cross of shame--only the crown of glory. By refusing the one, they lose the other. Here we see the importance of spiritual growth and development in the three spiritual powers of the soul--faith, hope, and charity, which grow amidst the trials and temptations that test them.

In the third category of people, there is no falling away from Christ. They remain but their religious spirit dies. The religious life of such people dies through neglect and indifference, or else it remains permanently in a dwarfed condition. Luke mentions that their spirits never come to maturity. This usually implies death along the way. We are taught that the lives of these people become totally absorbed in this world. Matthew speaks of their lives being choked-off by worldly anxiety and lure of money, to which list Mark adds, "*cravings of other sorts.*" In the mind of Luke, their spiritual progress becomes "*stifled*" because of cares, riches, and pleasures which results in no maturity for them. It could be said of such people that they serve the wrong master. Their treasure is misplaced and so is their heart. Death comes to their spirit for they fail to grow in love of Christ. They fail to develop a spirit of detachment from this world. The evangelist John would later teach:

*Have no love for the world, or the things that the world affords. If anyone loves the world, the Father's love has no place in him, for nothing that the world affords comes from the Father. Carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, and the life of empty show--all these are from the world. And the world with its seductions is passing away but the man who does God's will endures forever.*

*I Jn. 2:15-17*

These things that the first three categories of people lack are possessed by the fourth group to one degree or another. Matthew says of them that they hear "*the message and take it in,*" and Luke adds that they hear it "*in a spirit of openness, retain it and bear fruit.*" Mark simply states they "*are the ones who listen to the word, take it to heart.*" In a word--Jesus becomes their personal treasure.

## WEEDS IN THE KINGDOM

Matthew records six parables that Jesus told. With these parables, Jesus instructs His disciples concerning the kingdom of God on earth. Since the kingdom of God on earth is equated with the Christian Community and the Church, these parables instruct the disciples about the Church on earth.

The six parables are three doublets with two parables illustrating the same truth. We can assume from verse thirty-six, "*Then, dismissing the crowds, he went home,*" that three of these parables are spoken both to the disciples and to the crowds. In the first of the six parables, Jesus relates the story of a farmer sowing good seed in his field but during the night an enemy comes and sows a poisonous weed called the "*darnel*" or the "*zizania*." In the beginning of their growth, it is difficult to tell the two apart—their surface appearance is much the same. However, when the grain begins to appear, the difference is obvious. The two seeds grow side-by-side until one day the darnel is discovered. The farmer recognizes the work of an enemy. His servants want to root out the weeds, but the prudent farmer realizes the wheat will be uprooted with the weeds. He decides to let both come to maturity and separate them at the harvest.

The parable implies that good and evil will exist side-by-side in the kingdom of God. Like the wheat and the weeds they will grow together but their end will not be the same. At the final judgment, the evil will come to destruction and the good will experience salvation—"*gather the wheat into my barns (Mt. 13:30c).*"

Some see this parable as being addressed to Israel, and as explaining the reason for so much hatred for the Messiah in Israel. Some would see the synagogue as represented by the weeds, and the Christian Church represented by the wheat. They will both survive side-by-side in this world until the end of the world. The parable cautions the Church to be tolerant and patient. Just as in this world, there exists the good and the evil and God continues to let His sun shine and His rain fall upon both, so must the Church continue to be compassionate toward the good and the evil.

The parable teaches that the reign of God on earth will not consist solely of good people but that it will contain unholy people as well. This visible Church of Christ on earth will not be, as some Christians insist it must be, a holy community composed only of the saved. It will be composed of wheat

and weeds until the Second Coming, and the Church must not play God and seek to purge out the evil--tear out the weeds. In this world, the Church possesses the ministry to call all men to repentance--those in the Church and those outside of it. It is called to demonstrate the patience with sinners that reveals Christ's love, a love that desires all men to be saved: "...Rather, he shows you generous patience, since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance (2Pt. 3:9)." Jesus relates two parables which describe the future growth of the Church:

*Jesus proposed another parable to them. "The reign of God is like a mustard seed which someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest seed of all, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants. It becomes so big a shrub that the birds of the sky come and build their nests in its branches." He offered them still another image: "The reign of God is like yeast which a woman took and kneaded into three measures of flour. Eventually the whole mass of dough began to rise." Mt. 13:31-33*

Both parables carry the same message--the kingdom, which has a humble and almost imperceptible beginning, will become a great kingdom on earth. The Old Testament has revealed so many glorious things about the messianic kingdom that the beginning of this kingdom in Jesus is certainly a scandal to many. God's kingdom does not come upon this earth with the power of the sword and the wealth of this world. It comes in God's Son who appears meek and humble of heart, and filled with the Spirit of Love. It begins in meekness but it will end in glory. The reference to the birds of the air building their nests in its branches is an allusion to a vision of Daniel, which implies it will become the universal kingdom that gives shelter to all the nations. Daniel relates:

*These were the visions I saw while in bed: I saw a tree of great height at the center of the world. It was large and strong, with its top touching the heavens, and it could be seen to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, providing food for all. Under it the wild beasts found shade, in its branches the birds of the air nested; all men ate of it. Dn. 4:7-9*

In the second of his parables, Jesus uses the symbol of yeast permeating an enormous amount of flour. In normal usage, yeast or leaven would have been a symbol of evil. Jesus' use of it in this parable may be in reference to

the Pharisees' opinion of His disciples as being sinners. Jesus implies that from this despised group of "sinners," who were His disciples, a glorious kingdom would arise.

### THE ALLEGORY OF THE WEEDS

At this point, Matthew stresses the separation between the crowd, which represented Israel in general, and the disciples of Jesus. From this point, the separation becomes more finalized: Israel will grow more hostile towards Jesus, and He will turn more to His disciples and to their instruction. Matthew speaks of Jesus dismissing the crowd and going home. He records:

*All these lessons Jesus taught the crowds in the form of parables. He spoke to them in parables only, to fulfill what had been said through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will announce what has lain hidden since the creation of the world."*

*Mt. 13:34-35*

Matthew however, makes it clear that His wisdom "hidden since the creation of the world" is reserved only for the ears of the disciples of Jesus. We read: "Then, dismissing the crowds, he went home. His disciples came to him with the request, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field (Mt. 13:36).'" At this request, another parable becomes an inspired allegory in which Jesus Christ is presented as Lord of the world. In this allegory, Jesus confirms the presence of evil people within His kingdom on earth, who lead people away from Him and do other evil. However, this is the way things must be until the end. Then will be the hour in which the good and the evil will be separated. Jesus makes it clear that it will not be the work of the Church to decide who is weed and who is wheat--the angels will know. To the disciples' request:

*He said in answer: "The farmer sowing good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, the good seed the citizens of the kingdom. The weeds are the followers of the evil one and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world, while the harvesters are the angels. Just as weeds are collected and burned, so will it be at the end of the world. The Son of Man will dispatch his angels to collect from his kingdom all who draw others to apostasy, and all evildoers. The angels will hurl them into the*



*fiery furnace where they will wail and grind their teeth. Then the saints will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom. Let everyone heed what he hears!"*  
Mt. 13:37-43

Within the allegorical presentation of the parable the emphasis shifts away from the patient toleration of evil within the Christian Community to the final end when all the members of God's kingdom must come to judgment before the Lord who said to His people, "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex. 19:6);" "For I, the Lord, am your God; and you shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy (Lev. 11:44)." As Ananias and Sapphira were once removed from the Christian Community so will all evildoers be removed from the kingdom of God. Then the Scriptures will be fulfilled:

*You, however, are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims for his own to proclaim the glorious works" of the One who called you from darkness into his marvelous light.*  
I Pt. 2:9

#### THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

Our Lord now speaks two parables, which are not directed to crowds or disciples, but to individuals who must decide personally for the kingdom of God. In these two little parables, He stresses the worth and cost of entering the kingdom of God. In the first case, we have the unexpected and joyous discovery of an unsought treasure:

*The reign of God is like a buried treasure which a man found in a field. He hid it again, and rejoicing at his find went and sold all he had and bought that field.*  
Mt. 13:44

Here we have the individuals who discover Christ within the ordinary environment of their everyday life. Our Lord was always there--like the treasure in the field--but they could not see Him. He was hidden from their eyes. They had failed to recognize that under the gentle and humble appearance of Christ lay their Lord and Savior. Suddenly, Jesus is discovered for whom He is--human life's most valuable possession. Once the awareness comes, the treasure discovered and valued, the person prudently places the possession of Jesus above everything in life. Everything is sacrificed in order to enter the kingdom of God.

In the second case, we have the individuals who, all their life, have sought the best things in life. Their lives have been a pursuit for the precious and the beautiful--symbolized by a search for fine pearls.

*Or again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant's search for fine pearls. When he found one really valuable pearl, he went back and put up for sale, all that he had, and bought it. Mt. 13:45-46*

A fine pearl was valued higher than precious gold among the people of that time. In the Scriptures, the pearl symbolizes wisdom. The searcher in this case, discovers Christ whom he recognizes immediately as the pearl of great price--life's greatest possession. The cost of such a pearl? Everything! All possessions are immediately sacrificed in order to gain Christ--a possession beyond price. In both cases, the worth of the possession directed the price. Entrance into the kingdom of God is worth more than anything in this world and it demands a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to possess it.

Jesus closes His discourse in parables with yet another parable, stressing the worldwide embrace of the kingdom of God. No one is excluded from entrance. His embrace is compared to a dragnet thrown into a sea which encompasses every creature in the sea. Some would make nets to hold only the biggest and finest fish. The Lord desires to catch the smallest along with the greatest. This last parable reveals the catholicity of the kingdom of God on earth. Here, no one is excluded by God; salvation is offered to all. The parable describes the earthly existence of the kingdom of God before it reaches its final stage of perfection. The Church will be commissioned to save all.

After our Lord completes His teaching He asks His disciples if they have understood what He has taught concerning the reign of God. They reply in the affirmative. This knowledge of those mysteries, "*hidden since the creation of the world,*" will make them the enlightened and inspired scribes within the kingdom of God on earth. They will be like householders "*who can bring from his storeroom both the new and the old. (Mt. 13:52).*" The "*new*" is placed before the "*old.*" The words of Jesus imply that it will be the knowledge of the New Testament that will be the light for the proper understanding of the Old Testament; for in the "*new*"--Jesus Christ--the "*old*" finds its glorious and surpassing fulfillment.

## CHAPTER 15

### AS THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE

#### INTRODUCTION

When Jesus was a little boy his parents took him to live in a small insignificant village nestled in the Galilean hills, called "Nazareth," for his own safety. There: "*Jesus, for his part, progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and man (Lk. 2:52).*" Nazareth became native to Him, "*his native place.*" It became so identified with Him that people called Him the "*Nazorean*" and referred to Him as "*Jesus of Nazareth.*" The town, which found no mention in the Old Testament or in the writings of Josephus, found immortality in its relationship with Jesus Christ. Nathaniel, no doubt, expressed a common opinion about the place when he replied to Philip: "*Can anything good come from Nazareth (Jn. 1:46)?*" When God commissioned the Angel Gabriel to announce the coming Messiah we read:

*In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

*Lk. 1:26-27*

Nazareth was Mary's home. The presence of relatives there probably encouraged Joseph to settle there with Jesus and Mary. We know that by profession Joseph was a "*tekton*" which commonly has been translated as "*carpenter.*" However, the word implies much more. A "*tekton*" was a builder and the term generally indicated a craftsman of considerable skill. It is highly probable that Joseph was a builder of some consequence who traveled from Nazareth to many places that demanded his skills. It was a safe place for Jesus and Mary to remain.

Matthew tells us that in Nazareth, Jesus was known among the villagers as the son of the "*tekton*" and His mother was Mary. His "*brothers*" were named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas, and His "*sisters*" were known "*neighbors.*" Jesus was a recognized member of a family--a clan. Early and solid Christian Tradition confirms that all these "*brothers*" and

“sisters” were Jesus’ cousins rather than His blood brothers and sisters. Jesus was an only child—“*the son of Mary*,” as Mark reported. We read in Luke that when He was twelve His parents took Him to Jerusalem:

*His parents used to go every year to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, and when he was twelve they went up for the celebration as was their custom. As they were returning at the end of the feasts, the child Jesus remained behind unknown to his parents. Thinking he was in the party, they continued their journey for a day, looking for him among their relatives and acquaintances.* Lk. 2:41-44

There is no mention of any other children--only the child and His parents. When Jesus came to die, He knew He was leaving His mother alone in this world. He asked the “*beloved disciple*” to take her into his home. This would, culturally, have been an unthinkable thing to do if brothers or sisters existed.

Within the semetic culture, family relationships were extremely close and clannish. The Aramaic and the Hebrew had no word to express “*cousins*” other than “*all*” which could express any close family relationship. Close relatives were referred to as brothers and sisters. In Genesis, Lot is referred to as the “*brother*” of his Uncle Abraham, and Jacob is referred to as the “*brother*” of his Uncle Laban (See Gen. 14:14; 29:15). In First Chronicles, the sons of Kish are described as the “*brothers*” of their cousins, the daughters of Eleazar (See I Chr. 23:22). We find a reference in Second Kings to the “*forty-two*” brothers of King Ahaziah. The “*forty-two*” were no doubt relatives of varying degrees. Modern translation now refers to them as “*kinsmen*” instead of “*brothers*” (See 2Kgs. 10:13-14).

The Scriptures never speak of Mary as being the mother of anyone other than Jesus. The references to the brothers and sisters imply Jesus’ relationship with them and not Mary’s--they were “*his brothers*” and “*his sisters*.” We know from Scriptures that another Mary existed who was kin to Jesus’ mother. She was married to a man named Clopas and was the mother of a James and Joseph:

*Near the cross of Jesus there stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene.* Jn. 19:25

*Many women were present looking on from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to attend to his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. Mt. 27:55-56*

Within the cultural situation this Mary and her sons James and Joseph would certainly have been spoken of as the "*brethren*" of Jesus.

The perpetual virginity of Mary was commonly held in the early Church, and the first formal attack against it was made by Helvidius, who wrote in 380 that the "*brethren of the Lord*" were sons of Mary and Joseph, born after the virginal conception of Jesus. St. Jerome responded to this attack with his treatise "*The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary*" in which he demonstrated the falsity of Helvidius' teachings and used as his authorities such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr. St. Jerome concluded that the whole "*turba*" called "*brethren of the Lord*" deserve the name only in its broadest sense of cousins.

Matthew describes the return of Jesus to Nazareth and the reception given to Him by the villagers. They recognized with amazement His "*wisdom and miraculous powers.*" Nevertheless, they could not accept Him as the Messiah. He was too familiar to them. There was nothing extraordinary about His personage and His family:

*"Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't Mary known to be his mother and James, Joseph, Simon and Judas his brothers? Aren't his sisters our neighbors? Where did he get all of this?" They found him altogether too much for them. Mt. 13:55-57*

The evangelist John records an argument among the people over Jesus. Some questioned if He might not be the Messiah: "*When the Messiah comes, can he be expected to perform more signs than this man (Jn. 7:31)?"* Others replied to this question:

*"Still, we know where this man is from. When the Messiah comes, no one is supposed to know his origins." At this, Jesus, who was teaching in the temple area, cried out: "So you know me, and you know my origins? The truth is, I have not come of*

*myself. I was sent by One who has the right to send, and him you do not know. I know him because it is from him I come: He sent me."*  
Jn. 7:27-29

The reaction of the chief priests and the Pharisees to all of this was an attempt to arrest Jesus. No, Jesus did not live up to people's dreams and fantasies about a Messiah. Among them, His image only provoked their contempt. Jesus sadly commented: "*No prophet is without honor except in his native place, among his own kindred, and in his own house (Mk. 6:4).*"

The episode in Nazareth forms the climax of the Galilean ministry with its rejection of Jesus. Luke presents a very dramatic ending to Jesus' visit to His home town:

*At these words the whole audience in the synagogue was filled with indignation. They rose up and expelled him from the town, leading him to the brow of the hill on which it was built and intending to hurl him over the edge. But he went straight through their midst and walked away.*  
Lk. 4:28-30

It was Matthew who recorded those words of Jesus--spoken the night before His death: "*My heart is nearly broken with sorrow (Mt. 26:38).*" In Matthew's narration, Jesus will never again speak in "*their synagogues.*" The people are scandalized by His "*flesh*"--the ordinary, earthly state of the Revealer. They cannot perceive the divine reality within the Word made Flesh: "*Listen as you will, you shall not understand, look intently as you will, you shall not see. Sluggish indeed is this people's heart.... (Mt. 13:14-15).*" Nazareth symbolized Israel, and its reception of Jesus was the harbinger of things to come.

Matthew now mentions that Jesus has come to the attention of Herod of Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. As a native of Galilee, Jesus was under the political jurisdiction of this man. He was one of the sons of Herod the Great and had inherited part of his father's kingdom. Tiberius Caesar confirmed Herod's will but refused to give the sons the title of king and gave them the lesser title of tetrarch.

For some years Herod Antipas was married to the daughter of King Aretas of Arabia whose capitol was in Petra. Once on a visit to Rome, Herod lodged with his half-brother, Herod (Philip) who was a private citizen married to

their niece Herodias--the daughter of their half-brother Aristobulus. Herod Antipas became captivated by Herodias and persuaded her to leave her husband and return with him to his kingdom. Herodias readily agreed to this on the condition that Herod dismiss the daughter of King Aretas as his wife. His wife learned of their plan without Herod and Herodias knowing of it. She persuaded Herod to send her to his castle in Macherus which bordered the kingdom of her father. From there she escaped to her father in Petrea and revealed Herod's plan to divorce her.

King Aretas went to war with Herod and destroyed his army. Herod complained to Tiberius who ordered Vitellius, the Roman governor of Syria, to destroy Aretas. Vitellius was in the process of carrying out this order when he received news of Tiberius' death and this ended his jurisdiction to make war. Writings of Josephus tell us that after the birth of her daughter Salome:

*Herodias took upon her to confound the laws of our country, and divorced herself from her husband while he was alive, and was married to Herod (Antipas), her husband's brother by the father's side; he was tetrarch of Galilee.*

Luke tells us that "*Herod the tetrarch was censured by John on the subject of Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all his other crimes. He added to his guilt by shutting John up in prison (Lk. 3:19-20).*" Mark tells us that John said to Herod:

*"It is not right for you to live with your brother's wife." Herodias harbored a grudge against him for this and wanted to kill him but was unable to do so.* *Mk. 6:18*

*Her opportunity came on Herod's birthday when her daughter Salome danced before Herod and pleased him greatly. He swore he would grant her anything she asked for. Prompted by her mother she said, "Bring me the head of John the Baptizer on a platter." The king immediately had his misgivings, but because of his oath and the guests, who were present, he gave orders that the request be granted. He sent the order to have John beheaded in prison. John's head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who*

*took it to her mother. Later his disciples presented themselves to carry his body away and bury it. Afterwards, they came and informed Jesus.* Mt. 14:7-12

Matthew said: "Herod wanted to kill John but was afraid of the people, who regarded him as a prophet (Mt. 14:5)." Josephus writes that when Herod's army was destroyed by King Aretas:

*....many Jews considered it a punishment for what he did to John called the Baptist....for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God....Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly, he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus and was there put to death.*

According to Josephus, Herod killed John because of political expediency; he was a possible political threat.

Herod deserved Herodias. Josephus states that she brought Herod to political and financial ruin. Herodias' brother Agrippa, who previously had been a private citizen but had to run away because of debts, lived off her charity, rose to political fame under the emperor Caius, and was made king over the inheritance of his uncles, Philip and Lysanias. Josephus writes that Herodias:

*....took this authority of her brother in an envious manner, particularly when she saw that he had a greater dignity bestowed on him than her husband had....She was not able to conceal how miserable she was, by reason of the envy she had towards him.... She said that she could not bear to live any longer.*

Herodias insisted that they go to Rome and seek the title of king for Herod. Josephus writes:



*But for Herod, he opposed her request at this time, out of the love of ease, and having suspicion of the trouble he should have in Rome....But the more she saw him draw back, the more she pressed him to it, and desired him to leave no stone unturned in order to be king....because he could not otherwise avoid her importunity ....he got all things ready, after as sumptuous a manner as he was able, and spared for nothing, and went up to Rome, and took Herodias along with him.*

They met total rebuke in Rome. Josephus records that the emperor:

*....took away from him his tetrarch, and gave it by way of addition to Agrippa's kingdom; he also gave Herod's money to Agrippa, and, by way of punishment, awarded him a perpetual banishment, and appointed Lyons, a city of Gaul, to be his place of habitation.*

When the emperor learned Herodias was Agrippa's sister, he granted her a reprieve and the right to retain her own money. However, she replied that she would choose the fate of her husband. This reply angered the emperor and he "sent her with Herod into banishment, and gave her estate to Agrippa." Josephus concludes the incident with:

*And thus did God punish Herodias for her envy at her brother, and Herod also for giving ear to the vain discourses of a woman.  
Ant. of the Jews, Bk. 18, ch.7*

Matthew writes that when Herod Antipas heard about Jesus' reputation he exclaimed: "This man is John the Baptizer--it is he in person, raised from the dead; that is why such miraculous powers are at work in him (Mt. 14:2)!" It was dangerous for a person of Jesus' position to be brought to the attention of a political ruler of such "suspicious temper" as Herod. Jesus' influence with the great crowds made Him just as much of a political threat to Herod as John had been. Luke records the incident in which certain Pharisees warned Jesus:

*"....Go on your way!" they said. "Leave this place! Herod is trying to kill you." His answer was: "Go tell that fox, 'Today and tomorrow I cast out devils and perform cures, and on the third day*

*my purpose is accomplished. For all that, I must proceed on course today, tomorrow, and the day after, since no prophet can be allowed to die anywhere except in Jerusalem.” Lk. 13:31-33*

We are told that after Jesus heard the news of John's death, *“he withdrew by boat from there to a deserted place by himself (Mt. 14:13).”* At this moment in His life, Jesus needed to be alone. He, who would later shed tears before the tomb of His friend Lazarus, experienced profound sorrow at the news of the death of John, His extraordinary cousin. The execution-murder of John brought into sharper focus His own ultimate destiny. In solitary silence, Jesus reflected upon the work yet to be done and the time allotted in which to accomplish it. The kingdom of God must be firmly rooted on earth within the remaining time. His disciples were a vital part of this plan. He must now concentrate largely upon their formation.

Jesus once instructed His disciples: *“You must be clever as snakes and innocent as doves (Mt. 10:16).”* In the months ahead, Jesus will appear not as a man on the run but as a man wisely on the move; He will move as wisely as a serpent. In order to better appreciate Jesus' movements and maneuvers in the months which remain to Him, we will briefly recount His itinerary, and then go back and reflect upon the different incidents which occurred during this time.

Jesus delivered His discourse, on the parables, on the lakeshore near Capernaum. After that *“he moved on from that district. Jesus next went to his native place and spent his time teaching them in their synagogue (Mt. 13:53-54).”* He would have gone southwest. Jesus returned to Capernaum after His visit to Nazareth. This involved going northeast. There He received the news of John's death, after which He took a boat *“to a deserted place.”* He probably went directly east. Here He headed back to the district of Gennesaret on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. At this point He had an encounter with the Pharisees and scribes of Jerusalem. They probably represent an official inquiry about Him. *“Then Jesus left that place and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon (Mt. 15:21).”* This involved heading directly northwest--out of Herod's jurisdiction and into pagan territory--an area which is part of Lebanon today.

From here Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee, going southeast. He traveled south, probably along the western shore of the sea. At some point, He took a boat and sailed over to the district of Magaden, probably located about four miles from the city of Tiberius, which is more on the southeastern shore of

Galilee. In the district of Magaden, Jesus encountered the Pharisees and with them, for the first time, the Sadducees. We are told "*he left them abruptly.*"

Jesus took a boat and probably sailed directly to the north shore of Galilee. Upon disembarking He headed north into the territory of Philip, the tetrarch of Ituraea, coming into the district of Caesarea Philippi, which today is the modern city of Banizias in Syria. It is located at the south foothills of Mt. Hermon, which some insist is the mountain of the Transfiguration. Here for the first time, Jesus mentioned that He must go to Jerusalem.

From this very pagan area He then traveled southeast back to Galilee and to Capernaum for the last time. He then leaves Galilee for good, heading directly south towards Judea. The Scriptures speak of Him as being in Judea but "*across the Jordan.*" This implies He was in the district of Perea which was under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. Jesus remains prudently outside the jurisdiction of Jerusalem and the Sanhedrin.

Here, where the Jordan enters into the Dead Sea west of Jericho, Jesus prepared for His entrance into Jerusalem. Jesus had prudently conserved His freedom by being "*as clever as a snake.*" He will enter Jerusalem at the perfect time in which to accomplish His mission. Jesus called Herod Antipas "*a fox.*" It takes one to know one; Jesus out-foxed the foxes. They will have their day--but not their victory.

### THE LOAVES AND FISHES

When Jesus retired "*to a desert place by himself*" after hearing of the death of John the Baptist, we are told that the whereabouts of His location was spread about, and "*the crowds heard of it and followed him on foot from the towns. When he disembarked and saw the vast throng, his heart was moved with pity, and he cured their sick (Mt. 14:13-14).*" Jesus understood the crowds' search for Him--these sheep without a shepherd. There were surface reasons within their conscious awareness that directed them to Jesus. However, Jesus knew what was in the heart of man. Their coming to Him was truly a deeper inner search for God. Their hearts could not rest unless they rested in possession of God.

Once again, Matthew mentions Jesus' reaction to the "*vast throng*" which He beheld before His eyes: "*his heart was moved with pity.*" Jesus experienced

and identified with the sufferings of the people. It was not merely a feeling of their pain but a desire to be with them in their sufferings.

In Jesus' case, it was a desire plus the power to mitigate suffering and, where possible, free them from it. This Matthew simply expressed by saying—*“he cured their sick.”* In this gospel account He will no longer address the crowds.

On this occasion, the Gospel records one of the greatest deeds performed by Jesus--the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. This miracle is recorded six times in the gospel accounts. In this miracle, it is not a matter of healing power entering into an afflicted body nor a superior force dispelling an alien and evil spirit that causes physical pain and mental disarrangement. In this case material matter is miraculously multiplied. Such a miracle was not unheard of in the Old Testament. We read in Second Kings:

*A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing the man of God twenty barley loaves made from the first-fruits, and fresh grain in the ear. “Give it to the people to eat,” Elisha said. But his servant objected, “How can I set this before a hundred men?” “Give it to the people to eat,” Elisha insisted. “For thus says the Lord, ‘They shall eat and there shall be some left over.’” And when they had eaten, there was some left over, as the Lord had said.*  
*2 Kgs. 4:42-44*

In this account from the Old Testament, we see that it is not the prophet who multiplies the bread but the Lord. On the part of the prophet, it is his obedience in faith which makes the miracle possible. The multiplication is a divine act.

Interestingly, this is the first miracle in which Jesus involves His disciples in an intimate fashion. The time has come to make them assume some responsibility. He puts upon them the burden to do something about the people's problem. From the gospel report it appears the disciples grew anxious about the people becoming a problem as evening approached. They sought prudently to avoid an unnecessary crisis by suggesting that Jesus dismiss the crowd before dark. As they put it, *“This is a deserted place and it is already late. Dismiss the crowds so that they may go to the villages and*

*buy some food for themselves (Mt. 14:15).*” Jesus understood the concern of His disciples and their lack of a sense of personal responsibility for the peoples’ needs, so He made it their concern and their responsibility:

*“There is no need for them to disperse. Give them something to eat yourselves.” “We have nothing here,” they replied, “but five loaves and a couple of fish.”* *Mt. 14:16-17*

The disciples’ response to Jesus indicates the unreasonableness of His demand upon them and their own personal powerlessness before such a need. Jesus insisted that they put what little they have into His hands and put faith in the power of His word. We read:

*“Bring them here,” he said. Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed and broke them and gave the loaves to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the people. All those present ate their fill. The fragments remaining, when gathered up, filled twelve baskets. Those who ate were about five thousand, not counting women and children.* *Mt. 14:18-21*

The main action of the drama remains the action of Jesus. His words and power effect the multiplication of food. The cause of the miracle is the need of the people and Jesus’ response to that need. It is a response where one desires to enter personally into another’s situation and to be in it with them. It is not certain, from the account, whether the multiplication of the loaves occurred before the distribution of the food or during the distribution.

Matthew records no crowd reaction to such a marvelous miracle. The deed itself was a messianic sign to the people. A common belief existed among the people that when the Messiah would come--Israel would once again be fed manna from heaven. It is John’s gospel account in which we see the proper reaction on the part of the people and the proper interpretation of the miracle. John stated that the people desired to make Jesus king--by force if necessary. John records: *“At that, Jesus realized they would come and carry him off to make him king, so he fled back to the mountain alone (Jn. 6:15).”* At times, in the face of temptation, flight is the only course of action.

The gospel of John makes it very clear that the "*bread from the heavens*" is both the Word of God and the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Without a doubt this miracle is strongly symbolic and suggests the Eucharist celebration within the Christian Community. The gestures of Christ, the blessing, the breaking of the bread, the omission of the fish, the distribution by the disciples, all would certainly recall the Eucharist Celebration to the mind of the readers. It would be seen as a prophetic sign prefiguring the Lord's Supper and the final messianic banquet in which the blessed will be "*satisfied.*"

This miracle expresses the power of Jesus to always meet the needs of His people through the ministry of the Church. Matthew stresses the role of the disciples as the dispensers of the divine gifts to the people. The five loaves and two fish can also become a symbol of the gift of oneself to the Lord, through the Church. What of itself may not be a great deal, may be of service to multitudes through His power. Most of all, what the Lord needs from His disciples is faith and good will. We are told that the remaining fragments filled twelve baskets. These baskets were a large type such as those used in farm labor. This expresses the prodigality of divine providence that gives in an overflowing abundance. It has been widely noted that God's liberality ought not to encourage man's wastefulness. Even the abundant blessing of God must be prudently conserved and not wastefully squandered.

### JESUS WALKS ON WATER

In the following scene, we probably have a hint of the crowd's reaction to the above miracle. Jesus now immediately commands His disciples to depart for the other side by boat without Him. He remains and dismisses the crowd. After which "*he went up on the mountain by himself to pray, remaining there alone as evening drew on (Mt. 14:23-24).*" Matthew will not again mention an incident of Jesus at prayer until Jesus enters the Garden of Olives on the eve of His death. If the miracle performed that day symbolized the gift of the Eucharist, it would have strongly reinforced in Jesus the awareness of His own death, through which the gift would be made possible. He realized the "*hour*" drew near. The Will of God was clear. He would not tread the messianic path of earthly fame and glory but He would go the Way of the Suffering Servant. He clearly heard the words of Isaiah:

*If he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through Him.* *Is. 53:10*

Jesus prayed for the strength to walk the path of God's Will--to give His life that His disciples might live and be "*satisfied.*"

While Jesus is in serene prayer--His disciples struggle out on the sea. They are in contrast with one another: Jesus in prayerful peace and the disciples troubled by their hostile environment. Someone once said that the key to success is to pray and row at the same time.

Perhaps the disciples were only rowing. Their boat was impeded by heavy waves that tossed them about, and a strong headwind that slowed their progress. They had made little progress by the time three o'clock came. They were still far from shore where Jesus had commanded them to go. The long hours of labor left them exhausted. Sometime around three in the morning, the disciples looked up to see Jesus approaching their boat--walking upon the water. The sight of this "*vision*" had a terrifying effect upon them: "*It is a ghost!*" they said, and in their fear they began to cry out (Mt. 14:26)." The disciples "went to pieces." It has been wisely noted: "*Fatigue makes cowards of us all.*" The disciples were fatigued and frightened. Matthew notes that "*Jesus hastened to reassure them: 'Get hold of yourselves! It is I. Do not be afraid (Mt. 14:27)!'"*

This incident answers any question that the miracle of the loaves and fishes may have stirred within their hearts. It is a theophany--a divine manifestation. Jesus identifies Himself with the divine name--"*Ego eimi.*" This concept we studied at some length in the Fourth Gospel. We read in Exodus that Yahweh identified himself to Moses as "*I AM.*" He said to Moses: "*This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you (Ex. 3:14).*" When Jewish scholars translated this text into the Greek language they translated "*I am*" as "*Ego eimi.*"

Both the actions and the words of Jesus proclaim His divinity. The Old Testament said of God:

*Through the sea was your way, and your path through the deep waters, though your footsteps were not seen.* *Ps. 77:20*

*He alone stretches out the heavens and treads upon the crests of the sea.* *Jb. 9:8*

*Thus says the Lord, who opens- a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters....* *Is. 43:16*

*It is I. Do not be afraid!* *Mt. 14:27*

Jesus tells the disciples that they must not be afraid because God is with them. In Jesus--God is with them. The disciples are not to be afraid of God. We are told that those in the boat do come to the fullness of faith: *"Those who were in the boat showed him reverence, declaring, 'Beyond doubt you are the Son of God (Mt. 14:33)!'"*

Within this episode, the personality and character of Peter emerges for the first time. Peter appears as the representative and spokesman for those in the boat, *and it could be said of him for the first time—"He did not really know what he was saying (Lk.9:33).*

*Peter spoke up and said, "Lord, if it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water."* *Mt. 14:28*

Peter addressed Jesus as "Lord," itself an expression of true faith in Him. At this moment, Peter's words do not imply doubt in Jesus but in the apparition—"if it is really you." Peter asks to share in the miraculous power of Jesus Christ--to come on his own to where Jesus is. To Peter's request Jesus replies:

*"Come!" ....So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water, moving towards Jesus. But when he perceived how strong the wind was, becoming frightened, he began to sink and cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus at once stretched out his hand and caught him.* *Mt. 14:29-31*

Peter lost faith in the power of Christ to sustain him in such a threatening environment. Fear overcame him and he could no longer walk, in faith, towards Jesus. He began to sink and be lost. As he sank within darkness, he called out to Jesus with what little faith remained, *"Lord, save me!"* Within his darkness and peril he feels the hand of Jesus take his own and sustain him. With the help of Jesus, he climbed back



into the safety of the boat. Jesus chastised Peter: "*How little faith you have! Why did you falter (Mt. 14:31)?*"

Peter's faltering certainly reveals the quality of his faith. Did he falter because all the time he really had more faith in his own self than in Christ? When he was called upon to depend completely upon Christ, when his own resources were of no avail, he became frightened. His fright demonstrates, both to himself and to Christ, the measure of his faith in Christ. One day Peter will come to maturity of faith. Jesus prayed for it:

*Simon, Simon! Remember that Satan has asked for you, to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may never fail. You in turn must strengthen your brothers.*

*Lk. 22:31*

Whatever degree of faith the disciples possessed in Jesus it would be greatly shaken by His crucifixion. Only the resurrection of Jesus reconfirmed their faith, and only the reception of the Holy Spirit brought it to maturity. Many see this scene, presently recorded in Matthew, to have historically occurred after the Resurrection of Jesus. It describes the noted appearance of Jesus to Peter: "*The Lord has been raised! It is true! He has appeared to Simon (Lk. 24:34).*"

This episode may well express Peter's psychological condition following the crucifixion of Jesus. He had desired to follow Jesus, but in those dark frightening moments of his physical death, he faltered and lost hope—"We were hoping that he was the One... (Lk. 24:21)." Peter experiences Jesus' Divine Sonship in His resurrection. He recognizes Him as "Lord" and confesses—"Beyond doubt you are the Son of God." Peter comes to that fullness of faith for which Jesus prayed.

The recording of this incident at this point may be the author's way of preparing his readers for the crucifixion of Jesus, so that their faith will not falter before the scandal of the Cross. The incident at sea certainly symbolizes the Church--represented by the disciples in the boat--surrounded by a world of evil. The Church must not falter on its way to God or in its mission within the world. Regardless of the conditions in which the Church finds itself, it must not lose faith in the presence and power of Christ, which is always within it. Even though Jesus is now removed from sight, the

Church is always present to Christ and Christ is always present within the Church, to restore it to peace and bring it safely to shore. As the author of Hebrews wrote: *"He is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he forever lives to make intercession for them (Hb. 7:25)."*

Peter wanted to come to Jesus outside the boat. He discovered he did not have the faith to do it alone. Jesus had to put Peter back in the boat--and that was as good for those in the boat as it was for Peter. We are told that when Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the winds died down--there was peace--and the disciples within the boat came to perfect faith. Within the boat, they all arrived safely at their destination. The story is told of a woman who believed she was too holy to live in a particular Christian Community. She wrote to a learned and holy person for advice. She received this reply: *"Stay where you are! If you are wrong about your holiness, you need the Christian Community. If you are right about your holiness, the Christian Community needs you!"*

### THE TASSEL OF HIS CLOAK

We are told that when Jesus and His disciples reached the shore at Gennesaret--along the northeast shore of the sea--the people recognized Jesus at once, and brought to Him their sick and afflicted. The surpassing power of Jesus was once again demonstrated. He is presented as the *"Son of God."* At least in the sense expressed in the Psalms as Israel's anointed king: *"I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: The Lord said to me, 'You are my son; this day I have begotten you' (Ps. 2:7)."* Matthew tells us:

*People brought him all the afflicted, with the plea that he let them do no more than touch the tassel of his cloak. As many as touched it were fully restored to health. Mt. 14:35-36*

It is not without reason that Matthew emphasizes that the healing occurred when the people touched the tassel of His cloak. Recall the symbolism of the tassels worn by pious Jews. We read in Numbers:

*When you use these tassels, let the sight of them remind you to keep all the commandments of the Lord, without going wantonly astray after the desires of your hearts and eyes. Thus you will remember to keep all my commandments and be holy to your God. Num. 15:39-40*

Connecting the healing--which is a divine activity--with the touching of the tassels on Jesus' garment indicates the intrinsic holiness of Jesus. It is a divine affirmation that Jesus completely fulfils the Will of God--Jesus is totally in tune with the Will of God. Secondly, it demonstrates God's Will to heal and save His people through the Person of Jesus. Salvation flows from Jesus to those who come to Him in faith. With this, Matthew introduces an encounter between Jesus and a delegation from Jerusalem.

In the Gennesaret area Jesus confronts an official fact-finding committee composed of Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes. The Sanhedrin, the ruling religious body, probably commissioned this committee to conduct an investigation into this so-called Galilean prophet. They caught up with Jesus in the Gennesaret district, and a confrontation ensued which revealed who truly possessed the proper and authentic religious spirit in Israel.

The Pharisees maintained that the observance of their religious traditions demonstrated the religious spirit of a true Israelite. They condemned as sinners all who did not abide by their religious criteria. From Jesus' point of view, these people went around noting the "speck" in the eyes of others and failed to see the "log" in their own eyes. The confrontation began with the Pharisees' attack upon the disciples, which, in truth, represented an attack upon the Christian Community. Again, the disciples are accused of being sinners--of violating the prescriptions of ritual purity that were based upon disputed interpretation of Levitical legislation. The Pharisees said to Jesus:

*Why do your disciples act contrary to the tradition of our ancestors? They do not wash their hands, for example, before eating a meal.*

*Mt. 15:2*

It is not a question of hygiene but of ritual purity. Jesus does not directly defend His disciple's behavior. His defense is a counter-attack upon the accusers; they become the accused. In a sense, Jesus says to them, "You see the speck in someone else's eye and call it sin. Let me point out the log in yours which you call virtue. You say they violate the traditions of the ancients by their habits and I say you violate the law of God by your traditions."

Jesus centers in, for example, upon the fourth commandment of honoring ones parents. Jesus maintains the Pharisees violated it by a practice of dedicating their property, or possessions, to the temple, which removed it thereby from any secular use--such as supporting ones parents with it. This

“pious” practice, honored among the Pharisees, violated the fourth commandment in the eyes of Jesus. This was one example; He implied there were many others. The Pharisees made their judgment based upon the “speck”--Jesus renders His judgment based upon the “log”:

*....for the sake of your traditions you have nullified God's word. You hypocrites! How accurately did Isaiah prophesy about you when he said: "This people pays me lip service but their heart is far from me. They do me empty reverence, making dogmas out of human precepts."*  
Mt. 15:6-10

Jesus moves from this point to abrogate the very divine law upon which these traditions rested. We are informed that He summoned the crowd and made a solemn promulgation of His new legislation. Jesus decreed that a person was not contaminated nor corrupted by such external things as food, utensils, and walking over the graves of the dead. External things can not morally corrupt a human being. Moral contamination results from the evil conceived in ones heart and then expressed through human behavior. Jesus proclaims: *"It is not what goes into a man's mouth that makes him impure; it is what comes out of his mouth (Mt. 15:11)."*

Needless to say, such promulgation seriously upset the Pharisees and the scribes. In their eyes, Jesus not only disregarded the traditions of the ancients, but also put aside the law of Moses. This implied He placed Himself above the law--above Moses. Indeed, Jesus does place Himself on a level beyond their competence to judge. We are told: *"His disciples approached him and said, 'Do you realize the Pharisees were scandalized when they heard your pronouncement?' (Mt. 15:12)"* Jesus responded by insinuating that these men and their spirit were not of God. God would remove them from their position of authority over the people. They had forfeited their right to religious authority and obedience. He instructed His disciples to ignore them:

*"Every planting not put down by my heavenly Father will be uprooted," he replied. "Let them go their way; they are blind leaders of the blind. If one blind man leads another, both will end in a pit."*  
Mt. 15:13-14

Matthew mentioned that Peter came to Jesus and requested a fuller explanation of this teaching. The incident probably reflects the problem in the early Church over the matter of unclean food and people. Apparently, it took some time before Jewish Christians accepted this teaching of Jesus, and it became an accepted practice in the Church. This was clearly brought out in Acts, with Peter's vision in Joppa concerning unclean animals, and in his refusal to eat with the Gentiles in Antioch. In the light of the early Church's reluctance to accept this legislation, we can better understand Jesus' words to Peter:

*"Are you, too, still incapable of understanding?" he asked. "Do you not see that everything that enters the mouth passes into the stomach and is discharged in the latrine, but what comes out of the mouth originates in the mind? It is things like these that make a man impure. From the mind stem evil designs--murder, adulterous conduct, fornication, stealing, false witness, blasphemy. These are the things that make a man impure. As for eating with unwashed hands--that makes no man impure."*  
*Mt. 15:16-20*

It was this legislation by Jesus that made possible a unified Christian Community. It made possible a Eucharist in which Jews and Gentiles could sit down together at the same table with God.

### JESUS' MISSION

This episode with the Pharisees leads naturally into recounting an incident that occurred between Jesus and a Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon. After Jesus' encounter with the Jerusalem delegation, He traveled northeast into pagan territory. In this area a pagan woman came to Jesus seeking a cure for her possessed daughter. A strange scene is depicted in which a battle of wits ensues between Jesus and the pagan woman. It seems a bit rough to us, but such an encounter would have been appreciated in the semetic culture. One person seeks a concession from another person, which that person does not wish to grant. A contest of wits follows in which one emerges the winner. In this particular case--even though Jesus really plays the game--you have a feeling He wanted the woman to win. Matthew records:

*It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that locality presented herself, crying out to him, "Lord, Son of David, have*

*pity on me! My daughter is terribly troubled by a demon.” He gave her no word of response. His disciples came up and began to entreat him, “Get rid of her. She keeps shouting after us. “My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus replied. She came forward then and did him homage with the plea, “Help me, Lord!” But he answered, “It is not right to take the food of sons and daughters and throw it to the dogs.” “Please, Lord,” she insisted, “even the dogs eat the leavings that fall from their masters’ tables.” Jesus then said in reply, “Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass.” That very moment her daughter got better.*

*Mt. 15:22-28*

It is a tale full of symbolism. The woman represented the pagan world and her daughter--the pagan world’s rightful spiritual condition. It is a world open and desirous of Jesus Christ. Readily, the pagan world will come to Him in faith, and acknowledge what the Jews refuse to admit—“*Lord, Son of David.*” Jesus could have personally conducted a successful ministry among the pagans but He is directed, not by His own Will, but by the Will of God. He expresses this in these words: “*My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 15:24).*”

Even God’s Son is limited in what He may do in human flesh on this earth. Too often those Christians with a messianic complex overlook the fact that the real Messiah was limited in His mission--and limited by obedience to the Will of God. The ultimate curing of the girl symbolizes that Jesus will not refuse to save anyone who comes to Him in faith. As for the Gentiles’ desire for salvation: “*Your wish will come to pass (Mt. 15:28).*”

Jesus leaves this pagan district and returns to the “*house of Israel*” still seeking its “*lost sheep,*” as directed by the Will of God. Jesus continues to move along the shore of Galilee as the Good Shepherd. And the crowds come, bringing to Him their afflictions of body and soul. Matthew records:

*They laid them at his feet and he cured them. The result was great astonishment in the crowds as they beheld the mute speaking, the deformed made sound, cripples walking about, and the blind seeing. They glorified the God of Israel.*

*Mt. 15:30-31*

Matthew would not want his readers to miss the vision--the God of Israel

truly walks along the shores of Galilee leaving footprints in its sands.

Matthew concludes his report of Jesus' ministry to the vast crowds by recounting another episode in which Jesus miraculously feeds thousands. This deed certainly symbolizes the things to flow from the mission and life of Jesus. The words of Jesus, recorded on this occasion, explain so well all that God has Willed to be done through Jesus Christ:

*My heart is moved with pity for the crowd. By now they have been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not wish to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way.*

*Mt. 15:32*

## CHAPTER 16

### PRIMACY OF PETER

#### INTRODUCTION

The circle of suspicion and rejection widens its circumference in Israel to encompass the party of the Sadducees in Jerusalem. Mark noted that the Pharisees enlisted the support of the political party of the Herodians against Jesus. Presently, they plotted together to destroy Jesus. He recorded: "*When the Pharisees went outside, they immediately began to plot with the Herodians how they might destroy him (Mk. 3:6).*" The wave of popular approval of Jesus in Galilee crested but failed to break into a popular acclamation of His messianic role. The persistent opposition of the Pharisees served as a strong breaker against any wave of approval sweeping the nation to the support of Jesus' cause. As a result of their efforts, it subsided into confusion and doubt—"Do not tell us you too have been taken in. You do not see any of the Sanhedrin believing in him, do you? Or the Pharisees (Jn. 7:47-48)?" The Pharisees were at the heart of opposition to Jesus and later the opposition to the Christian Church.

The person of Jesus and His teachings became a total threat to the Pharisees. They had encased their very souls in a particular religious form which gave identity, worth, and power to them. They perceived, and rightly so, that the success of Jesus would be their demise. They had resisted the spirit of repentance for the same reason. It demanded death to their self-image. Pride hardened them in a religious philosophy which their lives incarnated. They were not merely "*religious*"--they were religion. The preaching of John and Jesus had earthshaking effects upon their lives--it threatened to destroy a way of life and all they held dear. The end result of true repentance was more than their prideful spirits could bear. They blocked and resisted the grace of repentance. If it had been accepted, it would have served as a needed light, revealing how truly distant their own religious spirit was from the Spirit of God. Accepting the grace of repentance would have destroyed their false self-image and reduced them to the humiliating awareness of themselves being sinners. That delusive spirit of self-righteousness would have been dissipated. The ground of their souls would have been prepared to receive the Word of God. As



impenitence hardened their hearts--it deafened their ears to the Word of God and blinded their eyes to the revelation of Truth.

It has been wisely noted that true self lies beneath the conscious awareness of self. One's self, as consciously perceived, rises out of too much self-delusion plus inadequate and erroneous feedback from the world around. The realistic image of one's self is kept out of conscious awareness--for the most part, because the vision of it would be too humiliating. One often prefers to live in illusion and reject the light of truth because one's true self-image is too humiliating to deal with.

When one is wrong at heart and resists the grace of repentance with its humbling light--a spiritual condition is created that prefers darkness to light. In fact, it "*hates the light*" and "*does not come near it for fear...deeds will be exposed (Jn. 3:20).*" When the human heart remains in darkness, human actions and relationships become objectively wrong. Jesus said of such people that their deeds are wicked. Nevertheless, such people consciously perceive their deeds to be righteous. This can only be accomplished by suppressing a vision of their true self, failing to look into their prideful and sinful hearts. All this they must do to support that false image that sustains a frail self-respect.

People who manifest moral goodness and truth by the life they lead and the gospel they preach become threatening to such people. Goodness and truth are unwanted lights in their lives. They deny the light and for the sake of self-preservation call it darkness. Their own light has become darkness. Only time will tell how deeply they will sink into moral darkness. If others make an attempt to convince them of sin, they immediately become a target for hateful and destructive feelings. They may become a subject of objective hatred--a hatred which may seek to destroy them in different ways and degrees.

When a person such as Jesus appears in a society governed by such people as the Pharisees were, He is Light revealing darkness. Judgment has come! His presence becomes unbearable and He becomes the subject of contempt and hatred--a Person to be destroyed. Every disciple of Jesus in this world--to the degree one is a true disciple--will meet with the same reaction. In a sense, Jesus commissioned them to it when He said:

*Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you.* Mt. 5:11-12

*You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world ....Let your light so shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* Mt. 5:13ff

“*This light of truth*” of which Jesus speaks is an external revelation of God and, thereby, gives external glory to Him when manifested. Evil people may gnash and grind their teeth over the presence of the Light (as we have seen in our society when abortion is truly proclaimed to be murder), but at the same time, God is being glorified. Revealers of such truth may well expect to be reviled and persecuted.

Jesus revealed the true moral condition of such people and the reality of their religious lives when he said:

*You hypocrites! How accurately did Isaiah prophesy about you when he said: 'This people pay me lip service but their heart is far from me. They do me empty reverence, making dogmas out of human precepts.'* Mt. 15:7-9

Such people have become intrinsically hypocritical. Their hypocrisy runs so deep it lies beyond conscious awareness. Only Jesus could make such a judgment. “*He needed no one to give him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in man's heart (Jn. 2:25).*”

The word *hypocrite* comes from Greek theater and refers to a character in a play behind a mask. The actor projects through a character-mask. In modern usage, it signifies a person who deliberately pretends to be something that he is not in order to deceive others. As an example--if a person pretends to be a friend of another but secretly is indifferent or disdainful of the person--that friendship is a pretense and that person is hypocritical. Or, if a person pretends to hold a particular belief doing so only externally for some social advantages--such a person is a hypocrite. However, in the case of the Pharisees condemned by Jesus, these people consciously perceived themselves as being righteous. They did not consciously project a false image. Jesus' condemnation of them signifies they deliberately did so, on an unconscious level. A condition of self-

blindness resulted from a refusal to repent, therefore their hypocrisy was morally blameworthy. They became, in Jesus' opinion, blind guides leading the blind into the pit. (see Mt. 15:14.)

The Pharisees possessed a deep seated hatred for Jesus. It is doubtful that the Herodians and Sadducees did also. The Herodians (a party that supported the rule of the Herods) and the Sadducees were both essentially political parties. Primarily, only their political and economic survival interested them. Religiously speaking, Jesus would have held little interest for them. Only when Jesus became a potential threat to their security did He become an object of interest--of fear and hatred. From what can be ascertained through historical sources, the Pharisees would have been the natural enemies of both the Herodians and Sadducees. Their personal distaste for any alliance with them was only overcome by their greater personal hatred of Jesus. The Pharisees probably brought Jesus to the attention of both the Herodians and the Sadducees, and stimulated their fears by suggesting that Jesus was a political threat. We will note at Jesus' secular trial that He will be accused of inciting a political rebellion. A statement made by the Jewish high priest to the Sanhedrin also insinuates this. We read in the Fourth Gospel:

*Some others, however, went to the Pharisees and reported what Jesus had done. The result was that the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we to do," they said, "with this man performing all sorts of signs? If we let him go on like this, the whole world will believe in him. Then the Romans will come in and sweep away our sanctuary and our nation." One of their numbers named Caiaphas, who was the high priest that year, addressed them at this point: "You have no understanding whatever! Can you not see that it is better for you to have one man die (for the people) than to have the whole nation destroyed?"....From that day onward there was a plan afoot to kill him. In consequence, Jesus no longer moved about freely in Jewish circles.*

*Jn. 11:46ff*

Matthew records that after the multiplication of the loaves "*he got into the boat and went to the district of Magadan (Mt. 15:39).*" Within this district Jesus again encounters a delegation of Pharisees, but this time the Sadducees from Jerusalem have joined them. The delegation probably was the result of the report given by the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. They appear to be more representative of the Sanhedrin. They probably

had been sent to gather evidence against Jesus and to destroy Him. They truly appear on the shore as *"a brood of vipers."*

Matthew relates: *"The Pharisees and Sadducees came along, and as a test asked him to show them some sign in the sky (Mt. 16:1)."* They have rejected the godly evidence which confirmed that Jesus is a prophet through whom the Word of God is proclaimed. His words, His miracles, His compassion for the poor and afflicted are all visible divine proofs and credentials that support Jesus' messianic claims. What the Jews now request from Jesus is some *"end times"* signs. A common belief among the Jews held that the messianic days would be heralded by frightful heavenly portents. It was recorded in Ezekiel:

*....I will cover the heavens, and all their stars I will darken; The sun I will cover with clouds and the moon shall not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken....I will spread darkness over the land....*  
Ez. 32:7-8

It is said in Joel: *"The earth trembles, the heavens shake; The sun and moon are darkened, and the stars withhold their brightness (Joel 2:10)."* They desired Jesus to perform such things as these as proof positive that He was the Messiah. Their request became a temptation of the same order of Satan's, which tempted Jesus to make a public demonstration of power by hurling Himself from the parapet of the temple. They tempt Jesus to step out of God's Will and perform a deed that would compel belief. Jesus replied:

*"In the evening you say, 'Red sky at night, the day will be bright;' but in the morning, 'Sky red and gloomy, the day will be stormy.' If you know how to interpret the look of the sky, can you not read the signs of the times? An evil, faithless age is eager for a sign, but no sign will be given it except that of Jonah." With that he left them abruptly.*  
Mt. 16:2-4

In the account given by Luke we read:

*When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say immediately that rain is coming--and so it does. When the wind blows from the south, you say it is going to be hot--and so it is. You hypocrites!*

*If you can interpret the portents of earth and sky, why can you not interpret the present time?* Lk. 12:54-56

The words of Jesus imply that these men can read signs. Signs have been given, and they deny what is evidently being signified. The depths of their spiritual blindness will be verified by the only sign Jesus will give them--His resurrection from the dead. The evangelist Mark simply records: "*With a sign from the depths of his spirit he said, 'Why does this age seek a sign? I assure you, no such sign will be given it!'*" (Mk. 8:12)" According to Mark, Jesus sailed from this district towards Bethsaida.

### LEAVEN OF HYPOCRISY

After the crossing of the sea, Matthew relates an incident in which he reveals the spiritual condition of the disciples. They are revealed to have some faith, but the strength and quality of their faith is poor. They are slow in understanding Jesus. As they cross the sea, Jesus reflects upon the recent encounter, and the terrible spiritual condition of those men who had challenged Him. They appear to Him like an evil leaven in Israel--like rotten fruit in a basket--corrupting everything it touches. Theirs is an evil, corrupting condition easily come by but only freed from with great difficulty. He must caution His disciples against this danger. The disciples however, are on an entirely different plane. Mark writes: "*They had forgotten to bring any bread along; except for one loaf they had none with them in the boat*" (Mk. 8:14)." They are heading towards a pagan district in which the food will be contaminated by an evil spirit. We read in Matthew:

*The disciples discovered when they arrived at the other side that they had forgotten to bring any bread along. When Jesus said to them, "Be on the lookout against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees," they could think only, "This is because we have brought no bread." Jesus knew their thoughts and said, "Why do you suppose it is because you have no bread? How weak your faith is! Do you still not understand? Do you not remember the five loaves among five thousand and how many baskets-full you picked up? Or the seven loaves among four thousand and how many hampers-full you retrieved? Why is it you do not see that I was not speaking about bread at all but warning you against the*

*yeast of the Pharisees?" They finally realized he was not issuing a warning against yeast (used for bread) but against the Pharisees' and Sadducees' teaching. Mt. 16:5-12*

Luke records Jesus as saying: "Be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy (Lk. 12:1)." The evangelist Mark, in his account of the same incident, emphasizes the obtuseness of the disciples' spirit, and Jesus' exasperation with their spiritual condition: "Do you still not see or comprehend? Are your minds completely blinded? Have you eyes but not sight? Ears but no hearing (Mk. 8:17-18)?" Following this episode Mark relates the curing of a blind man in Bethsaida, a miracle that occurs in stages. This miracle certainly symbolizes, for Mark, the disciples' difficulty in coming to full faith in Jesus.

### PRIMACY OF PETER

After disembarking, Jesus and His disciples head north into the district of Perea, governed by the tetrarch Philip, the brother of Herod Antipas. They came to the district around Caesarea Philippi, which rests at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Here Matthew records one of the most discussed incidents in the New Testament--the commissioning of Simon Peter by Jesus Christ to take His place as chief shepherd on earth. Few texts in the New Testament have been as exhaustively scrutinized as Matthew's testimony to the primacy of Peter. This text has been referred to as the "storm-center" of the New Testament interpretation precisely because it serves as a direct scriptural proof for the primacy of Peter, and an indirect support for the primacy of his successors. Obviously, this text, and its interpretation, is of equal importance to those who support and to those who deny the primacy of Peter in the Church. Time here does not allow an exhaustive treatment of those opinions contrary to the Catholic position; a study of this nature would not warrant it. That is more the material of an apologetical work. However, we will endeavor to present, clearly and logically, the present Catholic position on this text.

First, let us read the text as it appears in our English translation:

*When Jesus came to the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples this question: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others, Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "And you,"*

he said to them, "who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah," Simon Peter answered, "the Son of the living God!" Jesus replied, "Blest are you, Simon son of Jonah! No mere man has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. I for my part declare to you, you are 'Rock,' and on this rock I will build my church, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it. I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then he strictly ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Mt. 16:13-20

We see that Jesus first questioned His disciples concerning men's opinion about Him. They shared with Him all the positive rumors they had heard. All were erroneous. Their report, essentially, implies that Jesus' ministry has created expectancy. All the prophets named were associated, in the Jewish mind, with the advent of the Messiah. In a word--Jesus is not recognized as the Messiah.

Jesus now makes a distinction between the faith of the crowds and the faith of the disciples. Obviously, He hopes for a better answer when He says, "who do you say that I am?" Only Peter responds to this question. Simon Peter, under divine inspiration, had the correct conception of Jesus—"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" In this confession Peter expresses the foundation faith of the Christian Community. Everything else would flow from this belief. Without it, no true Christian discipleship would be possible.

When men could not attain to this faith, they found it impossible to believe the teaching of Jesus. They would abandon Jesus. When Jesus asked the Twelve if they would go away from him, Peter responded: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe; we are convinced you are God's holy one (Jn. 6:68-69)." Jesus recognized Peter's faith in Him to be divinely inspired. He recognized that this divine gift indicated the divine choice of Peter. Jesus confirms it.

All along Matthew has mentioned their "synagogue", now Jesus speaks of "my church." From the moment Simon had appeared in the Gospel accounts he has been referred to as "Peter." In Aramaic Peter would be *Cephas*, which

means *rock*. *Kepha* was a form of substratum rock needed for a solid foundation. We now come to understand why Simon is called *Peter*. "*You are Kepha and upon this kepha I will build my church.*"

The play on the word *kepha* is flawed in the Greek by the change of *petra* to *Petros*. It is completely lost in the English language. Jesus implies that Simon will, in some way, become the firm foundation for supporting His church. The idea of a man being a rock foundation upon which to build is not foreign to Semetic thought. It had been written of Abraham: "*When God looked upon Abraham, who was to appear, he said: 'Behold I have found a rock upon which I can build and base the world.' Therefore he called Abraham a rock.*" We read in Isaiah:

*Listen to me, you who pursue justice, who seek the Lord; Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the pit from which you were quarried; Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth; When he was but one I called him, I blessed him and made him many.*

*Is. 51:1-2*

The words of Jesus to Peter reflect this text. Peter is the *one* with the faith—"a rock" whom Jesus "*called*" and "*blessed him and made him many.*" Jesus had taught earlier: "*Anyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock (Mt. 7:24).*" In this text Jesus teaches that the rock foundation of the Christian Life is a living faith in Him. In other words--faith incarnated. The first to become such a *rock* is Simon. Jesus declares Simon to be *rock* and the *rock* upon which He will build His Church.

Many deny that this refers to the person of Peter, but only to the faith expressed by Simon Peter. The element of faith is certainly essential to understanding this text. Simon's expression of faith in Jesus initiated Jesus' declaration to Simon. The faith professed by Simon expresses the essential element of Christian belief. But, Christian Faith is not only a faith to live, it is a living faith. This faith cannot be separated from Peter. In Semitic culture, a man's name ought to express the man. Jesus recognized that Simon's faith in Him was so much a part of his being that it truly constituted his person. Peter's faith was the ground for his being appointed by Christ as the support and foundation of His Church. The "*Rock*" is Christ but Simon's faith was



so divine, so strong, so enduring that it identified him with Jesus—the Rock. Jesus recognized the divine solidifying of Simon’s personality by faith and renamed him *Rock*.

St. Augustine (354 AD) apparently could not make up his mind whether Jesus taught that the Church was to be built upon the person of Peter, or upon the faith expressed by Peter. He expressed both opinions. When this was brought to Augustine’s attention—he acknowledged it and added—“*The reader may choose whichever of these two opinions may seem to him the more probable.*” But, when you realize you cannot separate the man from the faith nor the faith from the man, the difficulty dissolves.

Jesus had begun His question with, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” The very reference to “*Son of Man*” recalls the vision of Daniel. Jesus’ reference to “*the jaws of death*” not prevailing against His Church, reinforces the reference to Daniel which reads:

*One like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven; When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, He received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed.*

*Dn. 7:13-14*

This reference implies that the Church, established by Jesus on earth, will not see death—as the kingdom of the Messiah, it is indestructible. Within this Church Simon Peter receives a position of primacy. Jesus infers this when He says to Peter:

*I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* *Mt. 16:19*

For any Jew familiar with the Old Testament, this saying would immediately evoke to remembrance a text from Isaiah which reads:

*On that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiah; I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. I will place*

*the key of the House of David on his shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open. I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot, to be a place of honor for his family; On him shall hang all the glory of his family: descendants and offspring, all the little dishes, from bowls to jugs. Is. 22:20-24*

This text tells of the dismissal of Shebna as master of the palace of King Hezekiah and the appointment of Eliakim. This is presented as the work and Will of God. No doubt, in the mind of Matthew, Shebna represented the Pharisees (or their position) and Eliakim represented Peter.

The *master of the palace* was equivalent to the prime minister of the kingdom or to the concept of the *vizier* in Egypt. In Egypt, the vizier was the highest official in the state. It was the duty of the vizier to send someone every morning to open the gates of the king's house, to admit those who have to enter, and to send out those who have to go out. In the absence of the Pharaoh, the vizier acted as regent. We see the same concept expressed in Second Kings where Jotham "*was vizier and regent for the people of the land*" in the absence of the king (See 2Kgs. 15:5).

Matthew opened his Gospel account with the presentation of Jesus as the King of Israel--the true descendant of King David. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah--he confessed Jesus to be King, the Son of David. Jesus responded to Peter and used words that a King of Judah would have spoken to a new *master of the palace*--a new vizier. For Matthew, Peter is the vicar of Christ who is the King of the Jews.

These words of Jesus to Peter certainly give him authority within the Church. Matthew sees Jesus making Peter the "supreme rabbi" of the Christian Community. Among the Jews the power of *binding* and *loosing* generally referred to the power to impose or remove an obligation by one who has authority to make decisions in legal and doctrinal matters. We saw Jesus exercise this authority when He declared all food clean. This power of binding and loosing also implies the power of a person to impose or lift an excommunication from the synagogue.

Modern Catholic commentators readily agree that all four evangelists took the primitive material available concerning the words and deeds of Jesus, and adapted this material for their own purposes. Few would hold they

intended to write a historical account of the life of Jesus--but rather that they used historical data for the theological purposes of their gospel accounts.

The Gospels were written by four different men for four different Christian communities. Each had in mind a particular need within the community for which he wrote. It is very obvious, as one reads Matthew, that he gives a position of special prominence to Simon Peter. On the other hand, Mark does not do so. For example, when Mark recounts the incident at Caesarea Philippi he merely records that Peter responded "*You are the Messiah (Mk. 8:29).*" No more is said upon this subject. A great deal has been made of this in light of the fact that many insist this was written, perhaps, some twenty years before Matthew. Others, however, find an adequate solution for this "problem" within Mark's text itself. They say Mark omitted it because it not only did not serve his purpose, but would lessen or destroy the point he desired to make.

Mark writes for a Church facing martyrdom, and one of the themes being expressed is how difficult it was for the disciples to understand the role of suffering in discipleship--this taking up the Cross and following in the steps of Jesus. The human spirit resists this teaching. Between chapters eight and ten a certain pattern is presented three times in which Jesus gives a prophecy concerning His passion. The disciples react to it in a dull and dense fashion--this is followed by detailed instruction. To have quoted Jesus' words of praise to Peter would have destroyed Mark's picture of the disciples as men unable to grasp Jesus' teachings. The problems facing Mark's community in Rome would not have been the same as the problem facing a Palestinian community some years later. In Rome, there may have been no need to stress the primacy of Peter, as it had never been questioned.

## PETER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Simon Peter appears as a major personality when we view the New Testament as a whole. He is mentioned about twenty-five times in the gospel accounts of Mark and Matthew, and at least twenty-five times in Luke, thirty-four times in John, and sixty-three times in the Acts of the Apostles. As the New Testament Scriptures unfold, the position of Peter develops. In certain letters written by Paul in the fifties, Peter appears as the most famous of the Twelve Apostles. Paul speaks of him as one of the pillars of

the Church at Jerusalem, along with James and John. When Paul looks to someone by which to measure his own apostolic commission he chooses Peter:

*Those who were regarded as important...recognizing that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter was for the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter as his apostle among the Jews had been at work in me for the Gentiles.*

*Gal. 2:6-8*

Paul made a point of stressing that he withstood Peter face-to-face and rebuked him for his unchristian behavior. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, we note that he makes reference to the popularity of "Cephas" in the community. Paul wrote: "Let there be no boasting about men: All things are yours whether it be Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas....(1Cor. 3:21-22)." Paul has no need to explain to the Galatians or to the Corinthians who Cephas was. Paul testifies that the Risen Savior appeared first to Peter—"he was buried and, in accordance with the Scriptures, rose on the third day: that he was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve (1Cor. 15:4-5)."

It is Luke who makes Peter the sole recipient of those words—"Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men' (Lk. 5:10)." He recorded that a special relationship existed between Peter's faith and the faith of the Christian Community. Luke wrote that Jesus had prayed primarily for the faith of Peter, and it would become the source of

strength to confirm the faith of the Church. He places this incident within the context of the Last Supper and in relationship to the prophecy of Peter's denial of Christ. We read in Luke:

*Simon, Simon! Remember that Satan has asked for you, to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may never fail. You in turn must strengthen your brothers." "Lord," he said to him, "at your side I am prepared to face imprisonment and death itself." Jesus replied, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow today until you have three times denied that you know me."*

*Lk. 22:31-34*

Luke also confirms that Jesus appeared first to Simon Peter: "*The Lord has been raised! It is true! He has appeared to Simon (Lk. 24:34).*" Here the promise and prayer, spoken before the Passion, have been fulfilled. The community believes in the resurrection of Jesus on the authority of Peter's testimony.

In the Gospel of John, Peter is often contrasted with "*the Beloved Disciple,*" and Peter often falls short in the comparison. However, this gospel account makes it clear that it is not "*the Beloved Disciple*" who does all things right and proper, who is chosen to replace Jesus on earth, but it is Simon Peter, the one who denied Him three times. John records a vision of the Risen Christ along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Within this episode, Simon Peter appears as "*the fisherman.*" It is he who recognizes the Lord and hauls all the fish upon the shore. In the scene that follows, it is not the fisherman who emerges, but the shepherd who will lead the People of God in the name of the Risen Savior. The entire scene recalls the prayer of Moses at the end of his own life and ministry upon earth:

*Then Moses said to the Lord, "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, set over the Community a man who shall act as their leader in all things, to guide them in all their actions; that the Lord's community may not be like sheep without a shepherd.*

*Num. 27:15-17*

In Jeremiah the Lord said: "*I will appoint over you shepherds after my own heart, who will shepherd you wisely and prudently (Jer. 3:15).*"

As the New Testament Scriptures unfold, the image of Peter appears to develop from being "*the fisherman*"--the first among the Apostles, the leading spokesman for the Church, a most active missionary--to that of being the chief shepherd. This reflects the life and growth of the Church that moves from missionary activities to a community of the faithful who must be nourished and guarded in order "*that the Lord's community may not be like sheep without a shepherd.*" The non-Catholic biblical scholar W. F. Albright wrote: "*To deny the pre-eminent position of Peter among the disciples or in the early Christian Community is a denial of the evidence.*"

Later New Testament writers, looking back upon the origins of the Christian Community, see it as rising upon the foundation of the apostles. We read: "*You form a building which rises on the foundation of the apostles and*

*prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone (Eph. 2:20)."* Speaking of the New Jerusalem the author of the Apocalypse writes: *"The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Rev. 21:14)."*

One of the last written works to be included within the New Testament was Second Peter. Scholars generally agree that it was not written by Simon Peter. It is, however, written by one who appears to be writing with his authority. The interesting thing in this letter--relating to present study--is the fact that Peter is being used to interpret Paul. Apparently, Paul's letters were being used by certain members of the Church as a supreme authority for Christian guidance. Within this epistle Peter emerges as the proper interpreter of these Scriptures. The authority of Peter is supported, not by his vision of the Risen Savior, which Paul likewise experienced, but by his presence at the Transfiguration, where Peter heard the testimony of the heavenly Father. At this stage Peter appears in the Scriptures as the interpreter and guardian of Christian Truth.

One of the major themes of Matthew's Gospel account is that the Christian Community has become the true Israel, which has received divine authority to proclaim and establish the kingdom of God on earth. He places the Christian Community in opposition to the Jewish Community under the leadership of the Pharisees, who insist they are the authoritative voice of God on earth. The rebuttal of Matthew against them is that since they rejected the authority of God by rejecting the Messiah, even in the light of his resurrection from the dead, God has rejected them. By their obstinacy and infidelity, they have forfeited their position as God's People and have no divine authority. Now they are plants not planted by God, and they will be uprooted; they have been replaced by the Christian Community.

Matthew emphasizes the commissioning of the disciples by Jesus. There is general commission in Chapter Five--*"You are the light of the world...your light must shine before men...(See Mt. 5:11-16)."* There is the apostolic commission of the Twelve in Chapter Ten, in which they receive a limited authority. In Chapter Sixteen, Jesus commissions Peter to a position of primacy within the Church. As mentioned, he becomes the *"supreme rabbi."* This gospel account will end with the final commissioning of the apostles by the Risen Lord, in which He fully empowers them to represent Him on earth.

## THE PASSION AND PETER

Once the primacy of Peter is accepted there still remains the question of whether this was a personal privilege granted to Peter, or a continuous ministry to be exercised within the Christian Community. The Scriptures seem to imply that the privileges and powers granted to Peter and the other Apostles were intended to be imparted to their successors. They received a mandate to make disciples of the whole world--a mandate not to be fulfilled within their lifetime. Likewise, Jesus promised to be with His Apostles "*till the end of time.*" Such a promise would be meaningless if it did not extend to the successors of the Apostles. The history of the Church of the second century implies that it did so. We see such men as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna accepted as authoritative leaders--as bishops--within the Christian Community, and recognized as successors of the Apostles.

As the clouds of darkness and hatred gather around Jesus--He discerns the signs of the time. The feast of the Passover approaches and Jesus must be permitted to arrive freely and unhindered into the city of Jerusalem. Through Peter, the disciples have come to recognize, finally, that Jesus is the Messiah. He immediately "*strictly warned*" them to remain silent. The leaders of the people have totally rejected Him and His claims to be the Messiah. Any public proclamation of it at this point, would but initiate an abortive attempt upon His life, and make impossible His entrance into Jerusalem. This must be avoided.

In this text, we note that Jesus mentions only the revelation concerning His being the Messiah. There is no mention of Peter's confession to His being "*the Son of God.*" This has led many scholars to conclude that this fullness of faith-expression came only after the Resurrection. At this point in time, the disciples had come to partial faith. They knew Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah of Israel. The nature of His divinity still remained hidden from them.

Jesus seeks to prepare His disciples for His departure from this life. The selection of Peter to replace Jesus as the leader of the Church on earth has been part of this preparation. Jesus now seeks to prepare them for both the worst and the best:

*From then on Jesus (the Messiah) started to indicate to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly there at*

*the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and to be put to death, and raised up on the third day. Mt. 16:21*

He apparently failed in both cases--to prepare them for the worst and for the best.

Peter had received the grace of divine inspiration enabling him to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. To know a thing is true does not mean to understand it. We know there is electricity, but we hardly understand it. Ignorance of the nature of electricity has led people to make some serious, irreversible mistakes. The moment of inspiration is one thing. The moment that follows it is another thing. The moment of inspiration is God's moment. The moment that follows it is man's moment.

Many people have been heavenly inspired while the actions which followed the inspiration were anything but heavenly inspired. Ignorance and pride and devilish influence can contaminate and misdirect the purest inspiration. For this reason, wise men urge "the inspired" to humbly submit their inspiration and their interpretation of it to the community for discernment, particularly to those versed in such matters.

In the Scriptures, we have a case in point: Peter knows Jesus to be the Messiah. Peter truly knows little about the nature and ministry of the Messiah, although he thinks he knows a lot. His ignorance has probably been reinforced by his inspiration and divine appointment. He had formed a very earthly, secular concept of the Messiah. It was a concept that he not only could glory in, but because of his close association with the Messiah, it was a concept that should be expected to bring him much personal glory. As a mirror reflects the sun, so the vicar of the Messiah could expect to reflect the glory of the Messiah.

When Jesus revealed the true destiny of the Messiah, the very heart and spirit of Peter rebelled. Intuitively he perceived what it implied for him, without his even consciously verbalizing it to himself. He will be involved intimately in that destiny. He will have to suffer because of his close association with Jesus, and because of his personal ministry. Peter's feelings and emotions run strong. Such a concept of the Messiah is unacceptable. There must be some mistake! Jesus has become misguided--taken a wrong turn. It is Peter's responsibility to make the necessary correction. The student discerns the Teacher to be mistaken. God would



never allow such a thing to happen to His Messiah (and to those who follow Him). The Teacher must be put back on the right track. So we are told Peter steps "out of line," and he who should have been following the Master, seeks abortively to take over the leadership of the Community. Matthew relates:

*At this, Peter took him aside and began to remonstrate with him. "May you be spared, Master! God forbid that any such thing ever happen to you!" Jesus turned on Peter and said, "Get out of my sight, you Satan! You are trying to make me trip and fall. You are not judging by God's standards, but by man's."*

*Mt. 16:22-23*

Jesus reacted totally to Peter's temptation--for this is as Jesus sees it. The man He confirmed to be "Rock" becomes a stumbling stone on His path--precisely because he is "out of line." He is not supposed to be in a position of leadership yet. He is too immature; he has much more to learn, not only about the Messiah but about "the Rock." He has permitted himself to play the role of Satan. Satan, too, tempted Jesus to go for the worldly and secular glory--to seek self-exaltation rather than seek the glory of God and self-sacrifice. When Satan stood before Jesus, the Lord commanded: "*Away with you, Satan (Mt. 4:10)!*" When Peter--playing Satan's role--stood before Jesus, the Lord commanded: "*Get out of my sight, you Satan (Mt. 16:23)!*" In other words--"*get behind Me and not in front of Me! Get back in line! You are to follow in My footsteps and not lead Me!*" The Lord does not drive Peter away as He did Satan; He makes him cease being a Satan by putting him back in his proper place. Peter will be able to lead soon enough, but before that day he has much to learn--and learn it quickly.

## DOCTRINE OF THE CROSS

Peter, and all the disciples, must learn the doctrine of the Cross. They must come to see earthly life from the standpoint of heavenly Wisdom, and its vision is paradoxical. From the human point of view it appears to be "foolishness"--nonsensical. It is revealed to the disciples that true life--with all its fullness and glory--can only be achieved by turning from the worldly and illusive desires of the human will and embracing the Divine Will. All must cling to that Will in this life, regardless of the consequences to ones personal life in the world. Jesus teaches His disciples the philosophy of Divine Wisdom:

*If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would a man show if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process? What can a man offer in exchange for his very self? The Son of Man will come with His Father's glory accompanied by his angels. When he does, he will repay each man according to his conduct.* Mt. 16:24-27

In the days that lie ahead--Jesus will live out this philosophy before their very eyes. If they have misunderstood what He has said, they will not misunderstand what He becomes! *"What I am will cry so loud you must hear what I am saying!"*

## CHAPTER 17

### SON OF THE LIVING GOD

#### INTRODUCTION

The prediction by Jesus of His sufferings and death--and the violent reaction of Peter to it--suggests the intimate relationship existing between the life of Jesus and the lives of the disciples. A unique unification exists between Jesus and those who follow Him. A veritable "oneness" of personality is created. The disciple is incorporated into the Person of Christ, but not in such a manner that the disciple loses his or her own unique conscious personality. That is madness--not Christian Discipleship. Nevertheless, the life of the disciple becomes, in a unique way, an extension of the life of Christ on earth. Jesus says: "*Live on in me, as I do in you (Jn. 15:4).*" "*Live on in my love (Jn. 15:9).*" Jesus identifies Himself with the lives of His disciples. When the Risen Jesus Christ appeared to Saul, the persecutor of the Christian Community, Saul heard a voice saying:

*"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "...who are you, sir?" he asked. The voice answered, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting."*  
*Acts 9:4-5*

Jesus did not ask Saul why he persecuted the Church, He asked Saul why he was persecuting Him. Jesus prayed that the oneness between Himself and His disciples would be as the oneness between Himself and the Father:

*I do not pray for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word, that all may be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be (one) in us...*  
*Jn. 17:20-21*

This intimate identification of the disciples with Jesus implies the disciples must share, in some degree, the life experienced by Jesus on earth:

*No pupil outranks his teacher, no slave his master. The pupil should be glad to become like his teacher, the slave like his master. If they call the head of the house Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!* Mt. 10:24-26

Jesus taught that no member of the household can expect to be treated better than the Lord of the house:

*If you find that the world hates you, know it has hated me before you....Remember what I told you: no slave is greater than his master. They will harry you as they harried me. They will respect your words as much as they respected mine.* Jn. 15:18,20

Jesus is “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”—“I have come to the world as its light (Jn.12:46),” and people found Him “altogether too much for them (Mt. 13:57);” “They immediately began to plot....how they might destroy him (Mk. 3:6).” Jesus said to His disciples: “You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world....(See Mt. 5:13-14).”

*What I am doing is sending you out like sheep among wolves.... They will haul you into courts, they will flog you in their synagogues. You will be brought to trial before rulers and kings, to give witness before them and before the Gentiles on my account. ....Do not let them intimidate you.* Mt. 10:16ff

All this was part of the life of Jesus and therefore could be expected to befall a disciple of Jesus--to some degree. So Jesus taught His disciples:

*"I solemnly assure you, unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies it produces much fruit.* Jn. 12:24

Jesus explains how this teaching applies to the disciples:

*The man who loves his life loses it, while the man who hates his life in this world preserves it to life eternal. If anyone would serve me, let him follow me; where I am, there will my servant be. If anyone serves me, he the Father will honor. My soul is troubled now, yet what should I say--Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this that I came to this hour.* Jn. 12:25-27

*But the world must know that I love the Father and do as the Father has commanded me.* *Jn. 14:31*

*Father, glorify your name!* *Jn. 12:28*

Jesus teaches the disciples the law of Christian existence. It involves temporal losses for eternal gains. *"He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me (Mt. 10:38)."* Only those who are willing to sacrifice their own desires, dreams, and ambitions in order to become part of God's desire and plan for the world and enter into Jesus' dream, will share in its Divine reality and glorious fulfillment. *"Father, all those you gave me I would have in my company where I am, to see this glory of mine which is your gift to me (Jn. 17:24)."*

The teaching of Jesus implies that men and women who live their lives only in selfish pursuits are truly foolish people. They have invested their precious time and energy of life in vanities. As we would say, they invested their "life's savings" in worthless stocks and bonds. One cannot gain a world without loss of self. One must decide which world is worth the price. Jesus considers it wise to lose one's life for the kingdom of God but foolish to lose one's life in gaining the entire earth. In the end where is the gain? Where will all this piled up wealth go, which moth and rust can consume? *"And the world with its seductions is passing away but the man who does God's will endures forever (I Jn. 2:17)."* Such a man is wise and builds his house upon the Will of God--the Eternal Rock. But on the other hand Jesus says:

*Anyone who hears my words but does not put them into practice is like the foolish man who built his house on sandy ground. The rains fell, the torrents came, and the winds blew and lashed against his house. It collapsed under all this and was completely ruined.* *Mt. 7:26-27*

The disciple who truly builds his house solidly and on rock, is the one who can honestly say, *"The world must know I love Jesus and do as Jesus has commanded me!"*

We are well acquainted with the idea of redemption of the world flowing from the death of Jesus, but we often fail to reflect sufficiently upon the personal reward received by Jesus for His *"obedience unto death"*:

*“God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name.”* Phil. 2:9

*“The name” symbolized the Person. Scripture teaches that because the Son of Man became that “grain of wheat” which fell unto the earth and died, God lifted Him up and exalted Him above*

*every other person. Before this Jesus “every knee must bend in the heavens, on earth, and under the earth and every tongue proclaim—“JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!”* Phil. 2:10-11

The apostles were practical and realistic enough to think about their own personal reward for being disciples of Jesus. Peter, of course, asked the Lord the question and received the response.

*“Here we have put everything aside to follow you. What can we expect from it?” Jesus said to them: “I give you my solemn word, in the new age when the Son of Man takes His seat upon a throne befitting His glory, you who have followed me shall likewise take your places on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Moreover, everyone who has given up home, brothers, or sisters, father or mother, wife or children or property for my sake will receive many times as much and inherit everlasting life.”*

*Mt. 19:27-29*

## THE TRANSFIGURATION

Matthew relates an event which is essentially related to the three previous events of Peter's profession of faith; Jesus' prophecy of His passion and His teaching on the doctrine of the cross. He introduces the incident with this proclamation by Jesus:

*I assure you, among those standing here there are some who will not experience death before they see the Son of Man come in His kingship.*

*Mt. 16:28*

Some may have interpreted this to mean that some of the disciples present would see the Second Coming of Jesus. However, the incident which follows directly interprets it properly. Jesus foretells that some of His disciples will

witness the ultimate results of His passion and death for themselves, they will personally behold the humanity of Jesus divinely glorified.

The Pharisees and Sadducees asked for a sign from "the sky." Jesus replied that an evil and faithless age is eager for a sign, but no sign will be given it. However, three of His apostles will witness such a sign from "the sky." The Scriptures relate that about six days following the incident in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus led Peter, James and John up onto "a high mountain by themselves (Mt. 17:1)." Some believe the mountain to be Mt. Hermon which stands over 9,000 feet high. This mountain was in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi. However, tradition places the mountain back in Galilee upon Mount Tabor. This place would have been about two or three days journey from Caesarea Philippi. What is related to have occurred when Jesus came down the mountain, seems to indicate He had returned to Galilee. Mount Tabor lies a few miles southeast of Nazareth. It ascends in isolated splendor about a thousand feet above the plains of Esdaelon. Some have been at pains to stress it is the symbolism that is important, and not the geographical location. It is a symbol of Mt. Sinai where, on two different occasions, God revealed Himself--first to Moses and then to Elijah. Some see Matthew's reference to "six days" as a deliberate attempt to evoke to memory the scene from Exodus where we read:

*After Moses had gone up, a cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled upon Mount Sinai. The cloud covered it for six days, and on the seventh day he called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord was seen as a consuming fire on the mountaintop. But Moses passed into the midst of the cloud as he went up on the mountain; and there he stayed for forty days and forty nights. Ex. 24:15-18*

According to the Scripture accounts, Jesus and His three chosen apostles arrive upon the mountain. Apparently the disciples are tired from the long journey. They fall asleep while Jesus prays. While at prayer, an extraordinary supernatural occurrence transpires. The disciples awaken to a startling vision. We read:

*He was transfigured before their eyes. His face became as dazzling as the sun, his clothes as radiant as light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them conversing with him.*

*Mt. 17:2-3*

The word Matthew used for *transfigured* implies that a metamorphosis occurred. The word used suggests that the very nature of Jesus changed. Within the Greek concept of being, the *morphe* (translated *form*) would express the very essential nature of a being. We could say--the very soul of a being. The *morphe* of a being makes a thing what it is. To change a man into a frog or an angel would be to change his *morphe* which means to destroy him as a human being. In other words, it changes the substance and nature of the being and creates something else. There can be changes within the *morphe* which do not involve changing the form of one's being. Changes occur within the *soul of a being* when its potential becomes actualized.

Each being also has its own *schema*, which is distinct from its form. The *schema* is inherent in the *morphe* but is not essential to it. For practical purposes, we may say that the *schema* is the external appearance of a being. The schema of a being can change, and does change, but the form remains essentially the same. At one month old a person essentially has the same *morphe* as when one becomes eighty years old. One certainly does not have the same *schema*. At fifty, one can see a picture of oneself taken when five and recall the incident vividly. The schema of the person in the picture has changed but the form remains essentially the same. With these concepts in mind we may, perhaps, better understand what Matthew implies had occurred within Jesus.

The Christian Church teaches that Jesus Christ possesses two natures--that of man and that of God. Jesus possesses both the *morphe* of man and the *morphe* of God. As the author of Philippians expressed it: "*Though he was in 'the form of God' ...he emptied himself and took 'the form of a slave' being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:6-7).*" As the author says, He appeared with the *schema* of man and not of God.

Many believe that when the Second Person of the Divine Trinity took upon Himself the *form of Man* while He lived upon this earth, He only consciously perceived Himself as a human being. He lived life as every true human being must. There was a suspension of any sensible awareness of His divine nature. This would have been part of the *emptied Himself* out. Such an opinion would not necessarily imply that He did not *know* He was Divine. It holds that He did not *sensibly experience* Himself as Divine. As far as conscious awareness went--He accepted His Divine Nature on faith. Most probably, this faith would have been supported by His own natural intuition.



Most human beings experience themselves as a physical, biological entity--they accept, for the most part, the spirituality of their souls on faith. We know that the mystics, on occasions, consciously experience their spirituality. From time-to-time, it breaks into their sensible, conscious reality, and may result in rapture, in which, as far as conscious awareness goes, they are out of the body and within another realm of existence. Paul wrote of such when he said:

*I know that this man--whether in or outside his body I do not know, God knows--was snatched up to Paradise to hear words which cannot be uttered, words which no man may speak.*

*2 Cor. 12:3-4*

Such things are ineffable--cannot be explained. Nothing exists within the world or within human experience by which to compare it.

When such mystical experiences pass--all is as it has always been. Only the remembrance of glory remains. This, too, becomes nebulous with the passing of time. More often than not, the five senses were suspended during the experience, and it is sense-impressions that enforce an incident upon the memory. Even after great mystical experiences, mystics must still live by faith upon this earth.

In the case of Jesus, it seems from Matthew's wording, that the Divine Nature of Christ briefly flooded His human nature to such a degree that, momentarily, His human nature was transformed by the Divine Presence. Jesus consciously, empirically experienced Himself as a Divine Being--as "*Son of the living God.*" Of course, such an experience greatly altered the human "*schema*" of Jesus--"*His face became as dazzling as the sun, his clothes as radiant as light (Mt. 17:2).*" Mark said his clothes became "*dazzlingly white (Mk. 9:3).*" Many reports have confirmed that the bodies of certain mystics, when in rapture, emit a radiant light.

Such an experience would have certainly--humanly speaking--strengthened and encouraged Jesus to endure the passion that lay ahead. The presence of the three apostles, however, may indicate that it was intended more for them than for Jesus--to strengthen their faith so they would not fall away in time of trial. The future of Jesus' mission on earth depended upon them. Through inspiration Peter had confessed that Jesus was "*the Messiah--the Son of the living God.*" When Jesus was "*transfigured before their eyes,*" Peter sensibly and empirically experienced the Divinity of Jesus. The three became eye-

witnesses to the Divine Sonship of Jesus. The fact that Peter had received such a vision during his lifetime lives on in the tradition of the Church. We read these words attributed to Peter:

*I shall press to have you recall these things frequently after my departure. It was not by way of cleverly concocted myths that we taught you about the coming in power of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we were eyewitnesses of his sovereign majesty. He received glory and praise from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him out of the majestic splendor: 'This is my beloved Son, on whom my favor rests.' We ourselves heard this said from heaven while we were in his company on the holy mountain.*  
2 Pt. 1:15-18

Most commentators agree that Moses and Elijah represented the Law and the Prophets, and their appearance with Jesus symbolized the entire Old Testament being fulfilled within the life of Jesus. In fact, the evangelist Luke implies that it will be in the coming Passion and death of Jesus that the Scriptures will find fulfillment. Luke indicates this when he says that Moses and Elijah “*appeared in glory and spoke of his passage, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31).*”

Peter, of course, in keeping with his spontaneous nature, reacted immediately to the marvelous vision. He wanted it to last--to be part of their everyday reality. With Moses and Elijah at the side of Jesus, the messianic kingdom would surely be established in Israel. He did not realize that he possessed Moses and Elijah and more, in Jesus. Matthew relates:

*Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how good that we are here! With your permission I will erect three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”*  
Mt. 17:4  
(It must be noted--Peter is learning)

Luke recorded: “*He did not really know what he was saying (Lk. 9:33).*” And Mark relates: “*He hardly knew what to say, for they were all overcome with awe (Mk. 9:6).*” Mark’s remark once again emphasizes the disciples’ lack of understanding.

While Peter is still speaking, “*a cloud came and overshadowed them, and the disciples grew fearful as the others entered it (Lk. 9:34).*” Matthew writes:

*He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Out of the cloud came a voice which said: "This is my beloved Son on whom my favor rests. Listen to him." When they heard this, the disciples fell forward on the ground, overcome with fear.*

*Mt. 17:5-6*

This is the same formula heard at the baptism of Jesus with the exception of the command—*"Listen to him."* The addition calls to mind the words in Deuteronomy: *"...that there would be a new Moses."* The command from Heaven confirms Jesus to be the New Moses. Moses told the Israelites: *"A prophet like me, will the Lord your God, raise up for you from among your kinsmen; to him you shall listen (Deut. 18:15)."* The Lord confirmed this prophecy of Moses. We read further:

*And the Lord said to me, "This was well said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him. If any man will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it."*

*Deut. 18:17-19*

Only by divine revelation can the true nature of Jesus be known. Human reason cannot reveal this. As Jesus said earlier to Peter, *"Blest are you, Simon son of Jonah! No mere man has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father (Mt. 16:17)."* Within the Old Testament the appearance of a bright cloud symbolized the Presence of the living God. This bright cloud was referred to as the *Shekinah*. Yahweh appeared to Moses within the *shekinah*. We read in Exodus:

*After Moses had gone up, a cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled upon Mount Sinai....he called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. Moses passed into the midst of the cloud.*

*Ex. 24:16ff*

*To the Israelites the glory of the Lord was seen as a consuming fire on the mountaintop.*

*Ex. 24:17*

Luke makes a reference, to the *shekinah* when he recorded the Angel Gabriel's words to Mary:

*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God.*  
Lk. 1:35

The Voice of God reveals that Jesus--His beloved Son--is the Divine Revealer, and mankind can have but one response to Him--*"Listen to Him!"* To the words of Jesus, there should be only one reaction--Obey them! God reveals His Will to the apostles when He commands them to *"Listen to Him!"* In the Old Testament--to listen and to hear meant to obey. The heavenly voice not only silences Peter but re-orientates him. Peter is to listen to Jesus and walk in His steps.

This vision clarifies the relationship between the Son of Man and the Son of God--the Son of Man is the Son of God become Man. The vision also anticipates both the Resurrection and the Second Coming of Jesus. Jesus will come in the glory that the disciples beheld upon the mountain: *"See, he comes amid the clouds! Every eye shall see him, even of those who pierced him (Rev. 1:7)."* Then His face will shine more brilliantly than the sun and He will be transfigured before our eyes.

As Matthew recorded, the vision left the apostles overcome with fear. As suddenly as clouds come and go, the vision passed. As the blazing sun suddenly sinks into the horizon, leaving the world wrapped in twilight beauty, so the dazzling beauty of the Son of God sinks beneath the humanity of the Son of Man leaving Jesus standing there in the *"after-glow."* Jesus touches the disciples and brings them back into a reality which He encourages them not to fear. Matthew relates:

*Jesus came toward them and laying his hand on them, said, "Get up! Do not be afraid." When they looked up they did not see anyone but Jesus.*  
Mt. 17:7-8

Mark recorded: *"Suddenly looking around they no longer saw anyone with them--only Jesus (Mk. 9:8)."* *"Only Jesus!"* No more would ever be needed in order for the disciples to come through... *"whatever is in prospect, and to stand secure before the Son of Man (Lk. 21:36)."* They would not need signs and wonders, nor travel by visions leaving very tenuous memories. They need only to listen to Jesus and abide in living faith. Paul would later write:

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Trial, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword? As Scripture says: "For your sake we are being slain all the day long: we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered." Yet in all this we are more than conquerors because of him who loved us.*

*Rom. 8:35-37*

John the evangelist asked:

*Who, then, is conqueror of the world? The one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God....It is the Spirit who testifies to this, and the Spirit is truth....It is the testimony God has given on his own Son's behalf. Whoever believes in the Son of God possesses that testimony within his heart.*

*I Jn. 5:5,6b,9b,10a*

Only faith in the name of Jesus--and in the Lordship of Jesus--will make the disciples of Jesus conquerors within this world--and within their own lives. Without that faith, one joins the crowds--which "*evil, faithless age is eager for a sign but no sign will be given it (Mt. 16:4)!*"

### COMING DOWN THE MOUNT

While enjoying the vision upon the mountain Peter commented: "*Lord, how good that we are here (Mt. 17:4)!*" Indeed--it was *nice* being there, experiencing divine consolation, and being enlightened concerning the nature of Jesus was *good*, but it was better for themselves, and the world, that all four came out of the vision and down from the mountain. Moses, too, had to be ordered back down the mountain. There was a crisis of faith at the foot of the mountain and he was needed below. Such things are but oases along the Way, in which the Lord refreshes and strengthens the spirit for the desert journey. Mt. Sinai was but a brief encounter--a stop on the Way to the Promised Land--a refreshing pause. The Scriptures reveal how needed the purifying journey within the desert is before entrance into the Promised Land.

As they come down the mountain, Jesus ties the experience to what is to come. It has been a preparation for the passion. However, it is not an experience to be shared prematurely with others--the Will of God must first come to fulfillment. Jesus cautions the apostles: "*Do not tell anyone of the vision until the Son of Man rises from the dead (Mt. 17:9).*" Prior to the

passion, the vision would have been misinterpreted. Mark writes: *"They kept this word of his to themselves though they continued to discuss what 'to rise from the dead' meant (Mk. 9:10)."*

As they come down the mountain, the disciples ask Jesus a question which probably echoed a question that the Jews often put to the members of the early Church--if Jesus is the Messiah, what happened to the coming of Elijah which the prophet Malachi foretold would precede his coming? *"Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day (Mal. 3:23)."* The disciples wondered about this prophecy. Jesus is indeed the Messiah but what about the prophecy that Elijah would precede His coming--that *"great and terrible day?"* Those who insist upon a literal interpretation of these Scriptures would indeed have a problem.

The disciples put this question to him: *"Why do the scribes claim that Elijah must come first?"* In reply he said:

*"Elijah is indeed coming, and he will restore everything. I assure you, though, that Elijah has already come, but they did not recognize him and they did as they pleased with him. The Son of Man will suffer at their hands in the same way." The disciples then realized that he had been speaking to them about John the Baptizer.*

*Mt. 17:10-13*

Jesus is the perfect interpreter of the Old Testament Scriptures. In this incident, we certainly have a lesson in prophetic interpretation. The words of Jesus imply that Elijah has come, yet they seem to imply that he is still to come. Jesus teaches that this prophecy was figuratively fulfilled--not literally so. John the Baptist represented Elijah--and, in spirit, the prophecy has been fulfilled. However, John has not been recognized as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. The Jews did *"not know him."* And so it will follow that the Jews will not recognize the *fact* that Jesus fulfils the messianic prophecies. In either case, the Jews could not recognize the fulfillment of the prophecies, for they transcend the letter of the prophecies: *"they did not recognize Him."* Matthew again emphasizes the importance of understanding in faith. As John had been destroyed by an *"evil and faithless age"* so Jesus, the Messiah, would suffer a similar fate. Some scholars have correctly pointed out that the words of Jesus do not indicate a literal return of Elijah before the end of the world. The prophecy is still open to a figurative fulfillment.

## A LITTLE FAITH

The rest of the disciples apparently waited at the foot of the mountain for the return of Jesus and His companions. Mark relates:

*As they approached the disciples, they saw a large crowd standing around, and scribes in lively discussion with them. Immediately on catching sight of Jesus, the whole crowd was overcome with awe. They ran up to greet him.* *Mk. 9:14-15*

Matthew simply relates:

*As they approached the crowd, a man came up to him and knelt before him. "Lord," he said, "take pity on my son, who is demented and in a serious condition. For example, he often falls into the fire and frequently into the water. I have brought him to your disciples but they could not cure him." In reply Jesus said: "What an unbelieving and perverse lot you are! How long must I remain with you? How long can I endure you? Bring him here to me!" Then Jesus reprimanded him, and the demon came out of him. That very moment the boy was cured.* *Mt. 17:14-18*

From the description of the boy given in the gospel accounts, we know he was an epileptic. Mark has added: "...he foams at the mouth and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid (Mk. 9:18)." The father described his son as a "lunatic." It was believed that the phases of moon affected such attacks. The Scriptures ascribe the illness to possession. Whatever the cause, the apostles had received power from Jesus to act in such cases. As we read in Chapter Ten, "Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority to expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and diseases of every kind (Mt. 10:1)." Nevertheless, the father of the boy reported to Jesus, "I have brought him to your disciples but they could not cure him." This case emphasizes the obstacles that are ingrained within the souls of men to the redemptive power of Christ. The redeeming love of God is present but the infidelity of man often renders it ineffectual.

The power of faith is an indispensable foundation upon which a life in the Spirit must be built. Unless faith that expresses a trust and confidence in Christ motivates the life and actions of a person, there can be no enduring,

no developing Christian spirituality. Without such faith, one may see a "good" person (by man's standards), but one does not see a spiritual person (by Christ's standards). Here is the building, rising upon the shifting sands. Jesus is the spiritual Rock; only those who live in faith--those who trust in the presence and power of Jesus within their lives--become solidified in Christ, and construct their house upon the rock foundation that withstands the winds of persecution and the storms of internal evil. The lack of this quality of faith within the disciples truly angers Jesus. His anger implies the lack of faith is willful. They are so much a part of the world and so little a part of Him. The Light shines upon their darkened situation: "*What an unbelieving and perverse lot you are!*" Jesus insinuates that grace has its day which will soon pass: "*How long must I remain with you? How long can I endure you?*" John records Jesus saying:

*While I am in the world I am the light of the world.* Jn. 9:5

*I have come to the world as its light, to keep anyone who believes in me from remaining in the dark.* Jn. 12:46

*The light is among you only a little longer. Walk while you still have it or darkness will come over you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. While you have the light keep faith in the light; thus you will become sons of light.*

*Jn. 12:35-36*

While Jesus remains in the world, He is the Light of the world. After He departs from this world, Faith in Jesus becomes the only light by which a disciple can see and walk within a darkened world. St. John of the Cross wrote that it is only the lamp of faith that lights our path within "*the dark night*," and enables us to firmly place our feet and walk securely toward the Promised Land. Only this Lamp of Faith burning brightly within the hearts of Christian disciples enables them to be the "*Light of the world*" and makes them "*Sons of Light*."

When the disciples asked Jesus why they could not cure the epileptic boy, He tells them plainly:

*Because you have so little trust...I assure you, if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would be able to say to this*



*mountain, "Move from here to there," and it would move.  
Nothing would be impossible for you. Mt. 17:20-21*

When you consider Jesus' commission and authorization to the Apostles in the light of their inability to perform the cure, you can only proceed in one of two directions. Either the failure was due to the power received, or to the men who exercised the power. Jesus makes it crystal clear the deficiency did not lay in the power received from Him. With the very same authority and power, He healed the boy. If those who had been authorized to do so could not heal the boy with that same power, then obviously it was a personal failure upon the part of the apostles.

Jesus' explanation to the disciples removes any idea that the power communicated by Him to them had any particular limitation. Failure was due neither to the quality nor the quantity of the power given to the apostles, but rather to the quality and quantity of their faith in Jesus. "*You have so little trust.*"

To make the point, Jesus says that even a tiny mustard seed of true and proper faith has the potential to remove mountains. This implied having faith in the words of Jesus--the words that Jesus spoke to the Apostles. Now in this case, only the Apostles would have been expected to work the cure. Matthew plainly stated who received the authority:

*Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority to expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and disease of every kind. Mt. 10:1*

For the other disciples to have attempted the cure would have been rash, and could have bordered upon tempting God. We need to bear in mind that in such works of wonder, one must possess both the authority and the faith. In this particular case--and its lesson has wide application in the Christian ministry--the Apostles limited the power bestowed upon them by the quality of their trust and confidence in the Word of Jesus; it was "*too little.*" Matthew does not attribute the failure, as does Mark, to too little prayer, but to too little faith. However, it has been noted that they go hand-in-hand; prayer is a dynamic expression of faith. In the mind of Matthew the deficiency of the Apostles rests not in the power given nor in lack of prayer, but in so little trust and confidence in Christ. Perhaps the foundation of their mistrust rested primarily within their own self-

concept. They did not lack trust in Christ's power to work, but for the power to work in and through them. This in itself subtly implies limitations in Christ--perhaps in His love. It places conditions upon His love and the exercise of His powers--conditions which He has not placed upon them. However, "*little faith*" causes Christians to do such things.

As mentioned earlier, some believe that Mt. Hermon, in Syria, was the mountain of the Transfiguration. They find support for this opinion in Matthew's statement—"When they met again in Galilee (Mt. 17:22)", and in Mark's comment—"They left that district and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not want anyone to know about it (Mk. 9:30)." Each statement followed the incident of the Transfiguration. Both passages, however, are viewed as transitory passages used by the authors to end one theme and introduce another. To use these texts in the argument of Hermon versus Tabor would be to deduce more than the authors intended. Both texts prepare the readers for Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

### THE TEMPLE TAX

Matthew sees the disciples gathering together in preparation for the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Mark emphasizes that Jesus now moves secretly through Galilee, heading towards Jerusalem. Both emphasize that Jesus does not want His disciples to misread the intention of His journey to Jerusalem; it will not be in keeping with their hopes. To place the journey in its proper perspective Jesus gives a second prophecy concerning His coming passion. It is the shortest prophecy, and with less detail. Some say it was probably the first prophetic hint given by Jesus concerning His destiny. In Luke's account, Jesus utters His prophecy amidst a flurry of excitement over His activities, in order to bring some cold reality into the situation. Matthew writes:

*When they met again in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men who will put him to death, and he will be raised up on the third day." At these words they were overwhelmed with grief.* *Mt. 17:22-23*

In this prophecy, the words "*to be delivered,*" appear to suggest that Jesus will be betrayed. However, others see it as an indication of God's hand--God will deliver Him and God will raise Him up again. The reaction of the disciples, in Matthew, indicates their understanding of the prophecy. Mark

and Luke both record that it was met with a lack of understanding. It was an understanding of being afraid to know the truth--preferring to remain in the dark. As Luke wrote:

*They failed, however, to understand this warning; its meaning was so concealed from them they did not grasp it at all, and they were afraid to question him about the matter.* Lk. 9:45

His type of "lack of understanding" would later be called "crass ignorance," which is that culpable and blameworthy ignorance that deliberately remains in the dark for fear of the truth. Playing the ostrich does not prepare one for the eventual reality that must be endured.

Matthew turns from this point to a consideration of the Church. Some have seen a relationship between the second prophecy of the passion and what now follows. Matthew ties the passion and death of Jesus with the Church that came to be, as cause to effect. The idea was beautifully expressed in First Peter:

*Realize that you were delivered from the futile way of life your fathers handed on to you, not by any diminishable sum of silver or gold, but by Christ's blood beyond all price: the blood of a spotless, unblemished lamb chosen before the world's foundation and revealed for your sake in these last days. It is through him that you are believers in God, the God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory.* I Pt. 1:18-21

Before leaving Galilee, Jesus returns for the last time to His home in Capernaum. Matthew relates an incident that occurred at this time, in which Peter appears as spokesman for Christ. The episode reflects his later role as the authoritative teacher within the Church. However, on this occasion we see that Peter still needs to be instructed by Christ. As yet, he has not been authorized to teach in Jesus' name; his education in the School of Christ has not yet been completed. We are told: "...the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter and said, 'does your master not pay the temple tax?' (Mt.17:24)." Now to the mind of Peter this was the equivalent of asking—"Does your master fulfill the law?" Every Jewish male, twenty years

or older, was taxed a half-shekel each year. This would be equivalent to two Roman denarii--a denarius was a recognized daily wage of a laborer. The tax was apparently based upon Exodus 30:15:

*Everyone who enters the registered group must pay a half shekel...  
This payment of a half-shekel is a contribution to the Lord....*

*Everyone of twenty years or more—must give this contribution to  
the Lord.*

Also we read in Nehemiah 10:33:

*We impose these commandments on ourselves: to give a third of a  
shekel each year for the service of the house of our God.*

The priests considered themselves exempt from this tax, and so did certain Scribes. It is said that the Essenes refused to pay it on the grounds that Exodus prescribed a one-time tax and not a yearly one. In the mind of Peter, Jesus was the fulfillment of the law. He replied to the collectors, *"Of course He does."* We are told that when Peter arrived in the house Jesus already knew what had transpired, and He immediately put this question to him:

*"What is your opinion Simon? Do the kings of the world take tax  
or toll from their sons, or from foreigners?" When he replied,  
"From foreigners," Jesus observed: "Then their sons are  
exempt."  
Mt.17:25-26*

Jesus implies that the temple is the House of God, and as the Son of the living God--He is greater than the temple. As God's Son He is exempt from such a tax. Even Rome at this period did not tax Roman citizens. The revenues of the government were obtained by taxing allies, provinces, and satellite kingdoms. After 70 A.D., the Jews were forced to pay this temple tax to the temple of Jupiter in Rome. Because the disciples of Jesus are identified with Him, they, too, are sons of the King, and are exempt from the temple tax. However, in the eyes of people such an act would appear as irreligious. It could cause scandal to *"little ones."* To avoid this, Jesus tells Peter:

*But for fear of disedifying them go to the lake, throw in a line, and  
take out the first fish you catch. Open its mouth and you will*

*discover there a coin worth twice the temple tax. Take it and give it to them for you and me.*

*Mt. 17:27*

Peter's former decision was correct but his reason was faulty.

Through this incident, Matthew once again emphasizes Peter's special relationship to Jesus. Jesus pays the tax only for Himself and Peter--Jesus stresses, "...give it to them for you and me." The Lord also stresses in this incident that the Church must not give needless scandal to the Jews. As "sons" they are not under the law--they are "free." However, at times their rights and privileges should be sacrificed. It is better to observe the law than to cause scandal.

### THE LITTLE ONES

A question Arises among the disciples over position and personal importance in the kingdom of God. This discussion surfaces, no doubt, because of the preferential treatment given to Peter. It evokes some natural jealousy within the Community. If Peter already possesses the number one position, what about number two and three and so on? On the other hand, does Peter have the position, or is it only an assumption on his part? You know, he has a tendency to assume things! Whatever the nature of the internal controversy, it surfaces in the question to Jesus: "*Who is of greatest importance in the kingdom of God (Mt. 18:1)?*" At this point Jesus does not give them a discourse but an example. He takes a child and places the child within their midst and He tells them:

*I assure you, unless you change and become like little children you will not enter the kingdom of God. Whoever makes himself lowly, becoming like this child, is of greatest importance in the heavenly reign.*

*Mt. 18:3-4*

Jesus uses this occasion to stress, not only the condition for greatness, but also, the fundamental condition for membership in the kingdom of God. He insinuates that if they are not careful, they might not even have a place in the kingdom, much less a position. The bottom line comes down to *meekness*--to being *poor in spirit*. Jesus puts a child in their midst and calls upon them to contemplate its position within human society and their concept of self. At this point we must be careful not to project our present attitude towards childhood into this situation. Within this time in history, as Paul points out

in one of his epistles, a child's position in society differs little from that of a slave. The child was the property of the father and possessed no recognized will of his own. The father could sell the child as a slave or execute him for a crime. The child possessed nothing in his own right and depended completely upon the good will of his father, leaving him in a position of total dependence.

Jesus teaches His disciples that as members of God's household, each of them must perceive of himself spiritually as a *slave-child*. They possess nothing of themselves and have a total and complete dependence upon God--their heavenly Father. The greatest disciple is the one who realizes how he or she is the least. This is the proper concept of Christian Discipleship. Those who perfectly come to this will be the greatest in the kingdom of God. Why? Because of the Lord of the household who gives good things to his children. As the disciple empties himself of self, God fills that emptiness with Himself. Such are Gods children, and they are most precious to Him. Jesus teaches His disciples that it is not one's position of authority or leadership that determines importance in God's kingdom, but rather, it is the fundamental condition of discipleship. These other things are ministries within the Church and must be wisely and lovingly ministered.

As Jesus is speaking to the future leaders of the Church, He moves on to shape their minds and attitudes towards the members of the Christian Community. He refers to all disciples--whether they are in authority or not, whether they be young or old--as "*the little ones*." Jesus emphasizes how precious, in the eyes of God, is each of these "*little ones*." Jesus identifies them with Himself: "*Whoever welcomes one such child for my sake welcomes me (Mt. 18:5)*." He especially desires for those in authority to realize the seriousness of their position. What they do to the least of these "*little ones*" will be considered as done to Himself--both good or ill. The apostles, as teachers, are warned to carefully guard the faith of the disciples. In His sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave a general warning about causing scandal in the Community. He warned of the coming false prophets "*who come to you in sheep's clothing but underneath are wolves on the prowl (Mt. 7:15)*!" Realistically, Jesus knows such things. He knows such people will come within the Church. He now stresses the evilness of it and gives God's judgment upon those who cause it:

*On the other hand, it would be better for anyone who leads astray one of these little ones who believe in me, to be drowned by a*

*millstone around his neck, in the depths of the sea. What terrible thing will come on the world through scandal! It is inevitable that scandal should occur. Nonetheless, woe to that man through whom scandal comes!*

*Mt. 18:6-7*

Once again, for the benefit of His apostles, Jesus contrasts one's temporal life on earth with one's eternal life. He warns them not to take the pleasure of the moment at the sacrifice of eternal happiness. He encourages the sacrifice of any physical or bodily blessing in order to gain heaven and avoid hell:

*If your hand or foot is your undoing, cut it off and throw it from you! Better to enter life maimed or crippled than thrown with two hands or two feet into endless fire. If your eye is your downfall, gouge it out and cast it from you! Better to enter life with one eye than be thrown with both into fiery Gehenna.*

*Mt. 18:8-9*

Jesus knew and experienced the world's attitude towards "*the little ones*" of this world. He knew what men admired and respected, and whom they despised. He cautions His disciples about allowing this worldly evaluation of human beings to creep into their own hearts and control their external behavior toward "*the little ones.*" To guard against such terrible worldly values directing Christians' attitudes towards one another, Jesus re-emphasizes the unique dignity and importance of each disciple in the eyes of His Father: "*I assure you, the angels in heaven constantly behold my heavenly Father's face (Mt. 18:10).*" Jesus makes a startling revelation--each of these "*little ones*" possesses a guardian angel. The providential love of God hovers over every individual disciple. A belief in guardian angels had developed among the Jews. However, the rabbis taught that only the highest angels had direct access to the Divine Presence--beheld the face of God. Jesus reveals that the highest form of angels watch over "*the little ones*" and pleads their cause before God. Jesus makes clear that His "*heavenly Father*" is also the "*heavenly Father*" of His disciples. To the apostles, His leaders, Jesus reveals the heart of the heavenly Father:

*It is no part of your heavenly Father's plan that a single one of these little ones shall ever come to grief.* Mt. 18:14

*He is like the good shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine out on the hills and goes in search of the stray.* Mt. 18:12

**A true disciple who understands and loves Jesus becomes a good shepherd who goes in search of the "little ones" who have been neglected--who have strayed and now are lost!**



## CHAPTER 18

### HIS CHURCH

#### INTRODUCTION

As the time approaches for Jesus to go to Jerusalem, the formation of His apostles becomes of utmost importance. When He is gone, they must continue His mission upon earth as His Church. Jesus chose these twelve men through the Holy Spirit precisely for this task. They would become twelve foundation stones upon which His Church--the New Israel--would arise. The words spoken by Yahweh to Old Israel would apply, with equal force, to this new assembly, which Jesus referred to as "*my church*":

*If you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.*  
Ex. 19:5-6

Jesus knew He was founding a new Church that would come into being after His death--and it would come into being as a result of His death. The Church would be a people "*delivered from the futile way of life*" that their fathers handed on to them, "*by Christ's blood beyond all price (See I Pt. 1:18-19).*" This new Church would literally be the Kingdom of God--or the Kingdom of Heaven--come upon earth. Such a creation comes only to be on earth where the Will of God is accomplished, as it is accomplished in heaven. This makes God truly present--not only in Power but in Person. Through such a Church God lives, loves, and walks among the inhabitants of the earth. Wonderful things could be expected to come upon the earth, through the Church that is faithful to the Will of God. Jesus saw the heart of His Church as the Love of God, and the action of His Church as the Works of God. Such an assembly of people would be special in the eyes of God: "*If you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession (Ex. 19:5).*"

When the three chosen representatives of the Church--Peter, James, and John--heard on "*the holy mountain:*" "*This is my beloved Son on whom my favor rests. Listen to him (Mt. 17:5),*" they knew by divine affirmation that

Jesus of Nazareth, incarnated for His Church, was the *“living Word of God.”*  
In the Person of Jesus:

*God’s word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thought of the heart. Nothing is concealed from him; all lies bare and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account.*  
*Heb. 4:12-1*

Within Jesus, the Church possesses all it needs in order to become what it was created to be, and in order to accomplish all it is commissioned to do. When the teaching of the Church was rooted in the Mind of Christ, when its will was rooted in obedience to His Word, when its spirit was being empowered through His Holy Spirit, the world would know His Church loved the Father, and did exactly what the Father commanded. Whenever the Church would separate itself in mind, will, and spirit from Jesus Christ it would fail in its purpose. It would need to be recalled to repentance and renewal for its sake and the world’s. *“You are the salt of the earth. But what if salt goes flat? ... Then it is good for nothing.... (Mt. 5:13).”*

Jesus needs the Church to be holy, enlightened, and apostolic. Jesus never underestimated the relationship between being *“enlightened”* and being *“holy and apostolic.”* He devoted much time and energy to the enlightenment of His apostles. Luke wrote in Acts:

*I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up to heaven, having first instructed the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit. In the time after his suffering he showed them in many convincing ways that he was alive, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking to them about the reign of God.*  
*Acts. 1:1-3*

When Luke writes that Jesus was *“speaking to them about the reign of God,”* he is telling us that the Risen Savior continued to teach the apostles about the Church. Jesus knew only too well how both holiness and the apostolic ministry could be perverted--on the one hand through human wisdom and earthly prudence, and on the other hand through erroneous teachings and false prophets. He has said to Peter:

*Get out of my sight, you Satan! You are trying to make me trip and fall. You are not judging by God's standard but by man's. Mt. 16:23*

Peter was indeed a good and sincere man but he reduced the Will of God to human wisdom; Jesus judged that by so doing Peter became an obstacle--a Satan--to the Will of God. Peter sorely needed enlightenment by Jesus. Jesus also warns the disciples that others would appear within the Church bringing false religion and evil spirituality. They would be "noonday devils" appearing as "angels of light." He taught the disciples: "*Be on your guard against false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but underneath are wolves on the prowl (Mt. 7:15).*" Jesus told them: "*You can tell a tree by its fruit (Mt. 7:20).*" However, this only holds true if you know something about the nature of trees and their fruit.

Jesus compared divine truth to good fruit upon the tree and false teachings to bad fruit upon the tree. In the world of horticulture it is often difficult to discern the good tree from the bad tree until the fruit is produced. Once, a tangerine tree was purchased from a nursery and planted in the garden of the Cenacle House in Orange, California. For several years the tree received excellent care but when the time came to give its fruit, it produced a bitter lemon instead of a tangerine. Within the same garden a navel orange was planted. After several years it produced a delicious fruit, however the following year it produced on other branches a very bitter orange. The same tree produced both fruits that appeared equally good. Only in the juice was it discovered that one was sweet and the other bitter, as they were both the same in appearance.

It is not always easy to distinguish the truth from the erroneous. We need established criteria by which we can distinguish truth from error. Unfortunately, some falsehood is like poison--it can only be discerned in its evil effects. One can be given arsenic in coffee instead of sugar and one cannot easily discern the difference--especially if it is mixed with some of the sugar. Time alone, with its evil effects, reveals what was truly received. Those hundreds of people who followed the teachings of Jim Jones, the so called evangelist, came to death. This death was symbolized and finalized when they drank the Kool-Aid laced with poison that he served them. Long before he poisoned their bodies, this false prophet poisoned their spirits with his deadly doctrines. "*Be on your guard against false prophets--wolves on the prowl who come to you in sheep's clothing.*"

Jesus confirms that He is "*the Light of the world.*" Jesus reveals the complete and total expression of God's Will for mankind. This He manifests to the Twelve Apostles. They become the receptors and reservoirs of Divine revelation. For this reason the Scriptures teach that this "*city of God*" on earth--the Christian Church--rises upon the foundation of the Twelve Apostles:

*The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were written the names of the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb.*  
Rev. 21:14

No teaching can ever be accepted within the Christian Church as a matter of faith that negates or contradicts the revelation the Church received from the Twelve Apostles. As Paul wrote to the Galatians:

*For even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel not in accord with the one we delivered to you, let a curse be upon him! I repeat what I have just said; if anyone preaches a gospel to you other than the one you received, let a curse be upon him!*  
Gal 1:8-9

Paul said to the Corinthians: "*I handed on to you first of all what I myself received (1Cor. 15:3).*" We have read in Ephesians:

*....the mystery of Christ, unknown to men in former ages but now revealed by the Spirit to the holy apostles and prophets.* Eph. 3:4-5

*You are....members of the household of God. You form a building which rises on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone.* Eph. 2:19-20

No evangelist has emphasized more than Matthew how very patiently and diligently Jesus taught the Twelve Apostles. This divine truth--revealed by Jesus--must be the foundation for true Christian holiness and for right apostolic action. With sermons, discourses, parables, allegories, symbolic miracles and signs, with examples from nature and from everyday human life, Jesus strives to firmly lay the foundation of divine truth within the minds and hearts of the apostles. They, through their apostolic ministry, must become the living foundation of Truth upon which the Church would arise and bring salvation and sanctification to the world.

We noted in Chapter Eighteen of Matthew how Jesus instructed His apostles on the nature of Christian discipleship and what constituted true greatness within the kingdom of heaven. The Apostles had already properly discerned that the kingdom of heaven would come upon this earth in the form of a visible organized society possessing authority and leadership. They had already begun to interpret this Church in the light of human knowledge and worldly understanding. They had already formed, in their minds, a concept of Christ's Church. What Jesus had said to Peter, he could have said to all of them: "*You are not judging by God's standards but by man's (Mt. 16:23).*"

Following the Transfiguration, Jesus and the disciples returned to Capernaum. Mark records:

*They returned to Capernaum and Jesus, once inside the house, began to ask them, "What were you discussing on the way home?" At this they fell silent, for on the way they had been arguing about who was the most important.*

*Mk. 9:33-34*

Jesus understood well the concept they had formed of the Church and of the roles they would play within the Church. They rightly deduced that they would be men of authority and power within the kingdom of heaven on earth. Jesus told them the night before His death:

*You are the ones who have stood loyally by me in my temptations. I for my part assign to you the dominion (the kingdom) my Father has assigned to me. In my kingdom you will eat and drink at my table, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

*Lk. 22:28-30*

The word translated *assign* is *diatithemai* which signifies the setting up of a death will. Here Jesus speaks to the Apostles of their inheritance after His death. His Church--His Kingdom--will be entrusted to them. Mark goes on to relate that after they had this little argument, "*about who was the most important,*" Jesus called a meeting within the house with the Twelve. He writes:

*So he sat down and called the Twelve around him and said, "If anyone wishes to rank first, he must remain the last one of all and the servant of all." Then he took a little child, stood him in their midst, and putting his arms around him, he said to them, "Whoever*

*welcomes a child such as this for my sake welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes, not me, but him who sent me."*

*Mk. 9:35-37*

It was at this point that Matthew relates that Jesus said:

*I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God. Whoever makes himself lowly, becoming like this child, is of the greatest importance in that heavenly reign.*

*Mt. 18:3-4*

One must first understand what it means to be a subject of the Kingdom of God before one can begin to reckon who is the greatest within the society. The criterion must first be established. Jesus established the norm for both greatness and for admission into the kingdom--we must become like little children. The children of the kingdom are those "*little ones*" who accept the Person and Will of God in their lives as a child accepts the person and the will of his father in his life. In the Kingdom of God, His Son, Jesus, sets the standard for greatness. Jesus Himself is the greatest in the Kingdom of God but not because He is the Son of the living God but because He is the Beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. As Jesus said: "*The world must know that I love the Father and I do what the Father commanded me (Jn. 14:31).*"

The world comes to this knowledge only through the objective evidence given by the life of Jesus--the Scriptures expressed the Will of God for the Messiah. Jesus became that "slave-child" who perfectly fulfilled the Will of God and demonstrated the perfect Love of the Father. The entire tapestry of His life, from conception to consummation, was woven by the golden thread of human obedience to the Divine Will. Jesus attributed what He said and what He did, in this life, to "*the Father who lives in me accomplishing his words (Jn. 14:10).*" "*I do as the Father commanded me (Jn. 14:31).*" "*The Father loves me for this: that I lay down my life to take it up again (Jn. 10:17).*" With his last ounce of physical strength He fulfilled God's Will and proclaimed with his dying breath:

*"Now it is finished." Then he bowed his head, and delivered over his spirit.*

*Jn. 19:30*

*Thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross! Because of this God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name. Phil. 2:8-9*

Both in life and death, Jesus taught His disciples how to be “*little ones*” and thereby come to true greatness within the kingdom of heaven.

Luke wrote that when a dispute arose at the Last Supper among the Twelve:

*....about who should be regarded as the greatest. He said: “Earthly kings lord it over their people. Those who exercise authority over them are called their benefactors. Yet it cannot be that way with you. Let the greater among you be as the junior, the leader as the servant....I am in your midst as the one who serves you.”*

*Lk. 22:24-27*

Later we see that Matthew records Jesus as saying:

*You know how those who exercise authority among the Gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to the greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. Such is the case with the Son of Man.*

*Mt. 20:25-28*

John the evangelist writes:

*After he had washed their feet, he put his cloak on and reclined at table once more. He said to them, “Do you understand what I just did for you? You address me as ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and fittingly enough, for that is what I am. But if I washed your feet--I who am Teacher and Lord--then you must wash each other’s feet. What I just did was to give you an example. As I have done, so you must do. I solemnly assure you, no slave is greater than his master; no messenger outranks the one who sent him. Once you know all these things, blest will you be if you put them into practice.” Jn. 13:12-17*

Jesus teaches the Apostles that authority and dominion must be viewed in the light of service. In other words, it is a ministry within the Church that calls for that emptying out--that dying to self--that others may live a true Christian

life. Such offices must not be viewed selfishly as opportunities for self-exaltation and personal glory. There is to be no "lording" it over others. That would be secularization and perversion of church authority and power, which will occur if disciples in such positions surrender to the lust for power.

Those in authority have been placed in positions in which they may easily become a scandal to the members of the Church. Those "*little ones*," like children within a natural household, have an openness and dependency upon those in authority, which leaves them vulnerable to scandal. Such scandal covers a whole spectrum of obstacles that may cause those weak in faith to fall from Christ. It may be doing something so enticingly evil that others are drawn into sin, or it could be coldness and indifference that turn others away or blocks their return to Christ. The Lord's words seem to imply that Christian leaders have two choices—they can be a source of scandal, or they can go seeking the little ones who have gone astray and are lost. They must act against human reason, leave the ninety-nine, and go seek the lost. Jesus' parable does not imply that one person equals in value the ninety-nine, rather it emphasizes that the one must not be neglected because it is only "*one*." It is the Will of the Father that not even one should perish—that not one of these "*little ones*" should be lost. Jesus emphasizes in the gospel of Matthew that accomplishing the Divine Will is the essence of Christian Discipleship. Therefore, since it is the Will of the Father that not one little one be lost, preservation of the faith and reclamation of the lost must become an urgent priority among Christians.

Jesus reminds His disciples that those little ones, whom they may be tempted to despise because they appear to be weak, poor, and insignificant, are not voiceless in the kingdom of God. Those voices which may not be able to be heard in the Church on earth have angelic advocates before the throne of God. The "*little ones*" have powerful friends in the heavenly court.

Christians are warned that those who cause the little ones to fall away from the faith, through their scandal, will be punished. It would really be better for them if they were removed from view. Jesus speaks of "*endless fire*" and about being thrown into a "*fiery Gehenna*." This image comes from Jewish literature and in ancient days, referred to the garbage dump located in the ravine south of Jerusalem. Here rubbish was burned and bodies of the enemies of Israel were thrown in the fire in the days of Isaiah. Isaiah spoke of it as a place of unending punishment for the enemies of Israel. He wrote:



*They shall go out and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me; Their worm shall not die, nor their fire be extinguished; and they shall be an abhorrent to all mankind.*

*Is. 66:24*

This reference to Isaiah probably implies that those "*who lead astray one of these little ones who believes in me (Christ)*" are truly enemies of the New Israel.

The apostles of Jesus were inclined to see the glory and prestige of their position in the Church. This led to arguments about who was the greatest among them. Jesus seeks to counteract this attitude by emphasizing the grave moral responsibility that leadership places upon them; the concept that Jesus expresses reflects that of the "*Watchman,*" which Ezekiel wrote of in Chapter Thirty-three.

### FRATERNAL CORRECTION

Scripture reveals that the Apostles had difficulty, not only with Jesus, but with each other. They had their arguments and quarrels. All that is part of life where there is interpersonal relationship. All that is part of the process of going from being *nepeoi* (a child), to becoming *teleoi* (a mature person). Since members of the Christian Community would be at different levels of growth and development--especially within the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the human personality--there would be many occasions in which offenses would be given to both the individual and to the community. At times, particular Christians would become a scandal to the Community. Paul speaks of an example of this in his First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter Five, and as Jesus said: "*It is inevitable that scandal should occur (Mt. 18:7).*" In the dispute between the Apostles over their "*greatness,*" Jesus intervened and ended, for the time being, the disagreement.

Jesus, however, will not always be present in Person, but arguments, disagreements, and scandals will always be there. Such things can bear bitter fruit within a community—anger, hurt feelings, dislike, hatred, revenge, calumny. Jesus prudently provides for such future things in a community of wheat and weeds when He would not be present to settle interpersonal problems within the community. He gives His Apostles and disciples a teaching on both offense and forgiveness.

Jesus first turns His attention to personal offense. He tells His disciples not to brood over offense, not to keep it pent up or suppressed within as such things cause harm to the person. Such a method of dealing with offense may cause more harm than the offense itself; we can become our own worst enemy. The Lord encourages a certain simplicity, humility, and sensitivity in approaching the problem. Jesus said:

*If your brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out his fault, but keep it between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.* Mt. 18:15

The presence of general good will and a degree of maturity should be all that is necessary. We ought to note the sensitivity demanded that seeks to keep the offense private. There should be no airing of dirty laundry for all to see. This is one way to avoid scandal, which may well injure the spirit of love within the Community. Prudently speaking, it is advisable to allow a "cooling off" period before attempting reconciliation. However, one must not wait too long. Hot anger can turn to cold hatred. Our Lord's advice here is certainly substantiated by Leviticus. We read:

*You shall not bear hatred for your brother in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow man, do not incur sin because of him. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countrymen. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.* Lev. 19:17-18

However, if the private method fails, Jesus says: "*If he does not listen, summon another, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses (Mt. 18:16).*" This advice reflects Deuteronomy 19:15:

*One witness alone shall not take the stand against a man in regard to any crime or any offense of which he may be guilty; a judicial fact shall be established only on the testimony of two or three witnesses.*

In the case at hand, the other person probably would not have been present at the time of offense. Here we are seeking an independent opinion, presumably an unbiased third party, whose task is to discern the reality of the offense or injustice and convince the offending party of fault. (Needless to say--a woman should not bring her husband's mother-in-law in to convict him of sin.) This

would certainly be good advice, generally speaking, in marital disputes or in disputes between parents and difficult adolescents.

If the second step fails, then a third and final step is taken. In this case the witness in the second step would serve as witness to a refusal at reconciliation. The problem is now referred to the Christian Community. *“If he ignores them, refer it to the church (Mt. 18:17).”* Now the case goes public.

In Jesus’ day this would have implied presenting the case in the synagogue before the council of elders, which generally consisted of the head of the synagogue, and ten elders, who were often called “the founders of the synagogue.” The council represented the community and acted in its name--which implies its power. It was this type of process Paul urged upon the Corinthians when he excoriated them for dragging each other into secular courts. We read:

*How can anyone with a case against another dare bring it for judgment to the wicked and not to God’s holy people? Do you not know that the believers will judge the world? If the judgment of the world is to be yours, are you to be thought unworthy to judging in minor matters? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? Surely then, we are up to deciding everyday affairs. . . Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a case between one member of the church and another? Must brother drag brother into court, and before unbelievers at that?*  
I Cor. 6:1-6

If the offending party refuses reconciliation--excommunication is advised. We read: *“If he ignores even the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector (Mt. 18:17).”*

This is the second time Matthew uses the term “*Church*.” Previously, he had used it in Chapter Sixteen where it refers to the Church to be founded by Jesus Christ. These texts imply that if the offending party refused to listen to the Church--failed to repent--he or she is presumed to have rejected the very authority of Jesus Christ: *“He who hears you--hears me (Lk. 10:16).”* Such individuals have spiritually alienated themselves from the Community--truly from Christ. Jesus advised that until they do repent, they are to be considered as a “*Gentile*,” a pagan who is not a member of God’s people and as a “*tax collector*,” who would be a member of God’s people who turned traitor--one now affiliated with pagans.

## POWER TO BIND AND LOOSE

From the text that follows, we know that the above encourages excommunication. The purpose of excommunication is not intended to be punitive but medicinal. We have an example of such a Church practice in Corinth. There was a case of incest within the Community. Paul demanded the community excommunicate the man. He writes the Church at Corinth:

*As for me, though absent in body I am present in spirit, and have already passed sentence in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ on the man who did this deed. United in spirit with you and empowered by our Lord Jesus, I hand him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. Is it not those inside the community you must judge? God will judge the others. "Expel the wicked man from your midst." Cor. 5:3-4,12-13*

We have a most important Scripture text in Matthew 18:18--here Jesus grants the Church, as a whole, the same power that He granted to Peter in Matthew 16:19. There He said to Peter: "*Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" Now Jesus says to the Church--apparently to the entire Twelve Apostles:

*I assure you, whatever you declare bound on earth shall be held bound in heaven, and whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be held loosed in heaven.*  
*Mt. 18:18*

It has been a generally accepted principle of government that rulers derive their power from the people whom they govern and represent. A ruler can possess no greater power than the people possess, as a whole. One cannot give what one does not possess. We often miss an important point in this matter of Church authority. The power within the Christian Community is the power of Christ--it finds its limits within the limits "(?)" of Christ's power. Christ totally identifies Himself with the Church--the Christian Community. It is the Body of Christ; it is the corporate symbol of Christ on earth.

In the case of the Church--it is a symbol of a spiritual reality. The Church possesses the power of Christ--the degree of power which Christ imparts to the Church. If Jesus Christ chose one man to represent the Church and govern it in His name, it would be expected that the community, as a whole,

would possess the same power that was possessed individually by its head. It has been widely accepted among scholars that Matthew 18:18 implies that distinct Christian Communities possess the power granted in Mt. 18:18, and that this power resides personally in the head of the local community--in the Bishop who rules and governs in the name of the community. This is another way of saying that the Bishop acts in the name of Christ. The authority possessed in-the Church by the Holy Father, the successor of Peter, and the Bishops of the Church, cannot be separated either from Christ or from the Church.

We know that, in actual practice, the Church has established tribunals to judge certain cases concerning members of the Church. We have marriage tribunals who possess the power to grant permission for married persons to separate from their married partners. They also possess authority to make decisions concerning the validity of a marriage union. These Scriptures sustain that such tribunals, within the Church, act with legitimate power and in the name of Christ.

In the text that follows, Jesus emphasizes His personal presence within the Christian Community. (It ought to be noted--His presence is not with individuals separated from the Christian Community, and not with gatherings of these individuals who willfully separate themselves from the Church. They, also, are to be considered as "*Gentiles*" and "*tax-collectors.*") Matthew records:

*Again I tell you, if two of you join your voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted you by my Father in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.*

*Mt. 18:19-20*

There was a saying among the rabbis: "*Two that sit together occupied in the Law have the Presence among them (Pirque Aboth 3:3).*" In the word--the Shekinah is in their midst. However, the Christian Community gathers together not around the words of the Torah but around the Person and Words of Jesus and He is in their midst. This text certainly confirms the Presence and Power of Jesus within the Christian Community. It adds a great dimension to community prayer--not prayers merely said in common, but prayers said with minds and hearts in union. Such prayer possesses the power of Christ's own prayer. As we can see from the case of Peter and Dorcas in Acts (9:36-41), this prayer can raise the dead. However, Christians should never pray outside of

the Will of Jesus Christ. His prayer always remains within the Will of the Father: "*Yet not my will but yours be done (Lk. 22:42).*"

This beautiful and powerful teaching on prayer has been inserted between the themes of offense and forgiveness. Does it not indeed imply the importance and power of prayer as means for dealing with both offense and forgiveness? Does it not suggest the power of prayer to win the grace of repentance and forgiveness for another? The dying Jesus left us such an example: "*Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing (Lk. 23:34).*" Jesus taught His disciples: "*My command to you is....pray for your persecutors (Mt. 5:44).*" "*Bless those who curse you and pray for those who maltreat you (Lk. 6:28).*" Let us keep in mind that, even though all prayer has power, there is no prayer-power greater than the Christian Community in prayer.

### FRATERNAL FORGIVENESS

The focus of attention shifts from fraternal correction to fraternal forgiveness. Peter introduces the subject with the question: "*Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times (Mt. 18:21)?*" Peter is speaking about a personal offense suffered from a member of the Christian Community. This is not a case of the person who offends and refuses reconciliation but it is the case of a person who offends, repents, offends again and repents again. That is a person who tries the patience of a saint and stretches the charity of an angel. What is the limit of forgiveness? When can you "*write off*" such a person and treat them as a "*Gentile*" or "*tax collector*?" Peter's suggestion of seven times was generous in light of the teachings of the many rabbis.

The rabbis deduced from Amos, that God forgave sinful nations three times and punished them on the fourth offense. Man could not be more forgiving than God. One rabbi (Jose ben Hamina) taught that an offending person ought not to seek forgiveness more than three times. Another rabbi (Jose ben Jehuda) insisted forgiveness should not be extended to an offender after the fourth offense.

To the mind of Christ, Peter's answer was not generous--not generous enough for a Christian. Jesus responds to Peter: "*'No,' Jesus replied, 'not seven times; I say seventy times seven times' (Mt. 18:22).*" The number seven represents perfection, and the number ten and its multiples represent limitlessness. Jesus told Peter--and the Church--to be forever perfectly forgiving. One must have

such a spirit, that unforgiveness has no essential home within the heart. There must be a willingness to forgive--and to forgive forever. Jesus' teaching reverses the teaching of Lamech found in Genesis: "*Lamech said....I have killed a man for wounding me, a boy for bruising me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-seven fold.*" If any person claims that the blood of Christ atones for their offenses, then they must hold that this same blood has washed away the offense of their repentant brother.

Jesus relates a parable to His disciples to impress upon them how tremendously important it is that Christians place no limits upon their forgiveness of each other. This parable teaches one of Jesus' most stern teachings within the Gospel. It relates such a frightful truth that most people imprudently choose to not think about it. Jesus relates a drama which depicts mercy, cruelty, and justice: God's mercy, man's cruelty, God's justice. We are told that this parable tells us about the way things are in the Kingdom of God. In other words--it tells us about how things are in the Church, and how they will be at the final judgment. Jesus says:

*That is why the reign of God may be said to be like a king who decided to settle accounts with his officials. When he began his auditing, one was brought in who owed him a huge amount. As he had no way of paying it, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt.*

*Mt. 18:23,25*

Now in the Greek text we are told that the man owed "*ten thousand talents*" which was an astronomical figure in the first century economics. To give you an idea of the amount--one talent was equal to six denarii. One denarius was considered the daily wage for a laborer. The debt amounted to the daily wage paid to 60,000 workers. Or, the sum earned by one man if he worked every day for around 165 years. This servant of the king had gotten himself into a hopeless condition. At the command of the king his whole existence dissolved before him. Our Lord goes on to relate:

*At that the official prostrated himself in homage and said, "My lord, be patient with me and I will pay you back in full." Moved with pity, the master let the official go and wrote off the debt. (Now we must note there was no need to pay back the debt for it had been wiped away--because of the pity of the king, it was no longer owed.) But when the same official went out he met a fellow servant who owed*

*him a mere fraction of what he himself owed. (In the Greek text the amount is given as "one hundred denarii"--a debt easily paid off within a year.) He seized him and throttled him. "Pay back what you owe," he demanded. His fellow servant dropped to his knees and began to plead with him: "Just give me time and I will pay you back in full." But he would hear none of it. Instead, he had him put in jail until he paid back what he owed. When his fellow servants saw what had happened they were badly shaken, and went to their master to report the whole incident. His master sent for him and said, "You worthless wretch! I cancelled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you?" Then in anger the master handed him over to the torturers until he paid back all that he owed.*

*Mt. 18:26-34*

Let us recall what we learned in our study of the parable. A parable, basically, has one main point, and it usually delivers its punch in the last line. Let us carefully listen to it: *"My heavenly Father will treat you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart."* Now remember, when Our Lord said *"will treat you"* He is speaking to you and me. We can hear that last sentence without ever hearing that vital phrase—*"from his heart."*

The Lord's teaching is clear: As members of the Christian Community our offenses against God have been forgiven--wiped away by the atoning Blood of Christ, applied to our souls through the holy sacraments received. However, if we refuse to extend forgiveness to others within the Christian Community, we will be lost. At the final Judgment, God will set aside mercy and deal justly with us. He will use our own measure. As we have measured to others--He will measure to us. Make no mistake--Jesus teaches that all the infinite forgiveness of sins will be revoked, and the burden of our sinful lives will weigh our souls into Hell.

An unforgiving spirit is a hateful spirit. Hate spiritualizes itself with time and becomes part of our soul. If we die in a spirit of hate--hate becomes eternalized within us. No such spirit can enter heaven. Such a one would destroy heaven. As one man expressed it:

*My need for divine forgiveness, being infinitely greater than my need for human justice and vindication, I will not withhold personal forgiveness from my enemies.*



It has been wisely said that the phrase, "*I forgive but I cannot forget,*" is not a Christian saying. An unforgettable offense is, more than likely, an unforgiven one. That forgiveness needs to be taken to prayer and kept there! When one truly forgives "*from the heart,*" it is as if the offense never occurred.

Matthew now records:

*When Jesus had finished this discourse, he left Galilee and came to the district of Judea across the Jordan. Great crowds followed him and he cured them there.*

*Mt. 19:1*

### THE QUESTION OF DIVORCE

Jesus ended His work in Galilee and planned to be in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Jesus would have traveled the pilgrim route along the east side of the Jordan River, passing through the district of Decapolis and Perea—avoiding entrance into Samaria as the Samaritans were especially hostile to pilgrims heading to Jerusalem for the feast. Jesus is leading His disciples to Jerusalem and to the Cross. Apparently, they all remained in the district of Perea, east of Jericho on the east side of the Jordan. Here the disciples gather to await Jesus' journey and entrance into Jerusalem. During this time, Jesus continues the instruction of the Apostles.

At this point the question of divorce is introduced by certain Pharisees who, in order to test Him, ask Jesus, "*May a man divorce his wife for any reason whatever (Mt. 19:3)?*" This question reflects the argument existing, at the time, between two important schools of theological thought, the school of Rabbi Hillel which permitted a man to divorce his wife "*for any cause,*" and the school of Rabbi Shammai which insisted that a man could only divorce his wife in case of adultery. The decisions of both men rested upon the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 which reads:

*When a man, after marrying a woman and having relations with her, is later displeased with her because he finds in her something indecent, and therefore he writes out a bill of divorce and hands it to her, thus dismissing her from his house....*

The status of women among the semetic people was most precarious. They had been reduced to mere property--belonging first to their fathers, and secondly to their husbands. They possessed few privileges and fewer rights

under the Law. Divorce often placed them in terrible economic situations which only lessened their human dignity. Unfortunately, the scriptural laws often enforced these injustices. We have an example of this in Deuteronomy 24:1.

Today we need to bear in mind that the Jews accepted Moses, rightly so, as the divinely authorized teacher and governing authority in Israel. They equated Moses' teachings with the Voice of Yahweh. This they expressed in the written Scriptures by prefacing what Moses said with "*the Lord said.*" The sacred writers did not intend to imply that all these teachings were divine revelations from Yahweh, but rather that Moses spoke with Divine authority at all times, and God demanded His words be obeyed. Nevertheless, this did not imply that all these teachings represented the mind of Yahweh. Jesus' own teaching also implies this in His response to the Pharisees' question. Here, He by-passed the Law and returned to the words of Genesis, with which He demonstrated the original plan of the Creator for man and woman.

In Genesis, the creation of woman from the side of Adam appears to symbolize her equality with man. She is neither beneath him (not taken from his foot) nor is she over him (not taken from his head). She appears as his partner. As we read in our translation: "*I will make a suitable partner for him (Gen. 2:18).*" This concept may be somewhat of an alteration of its original meaning by a mistranslation of the Hebrew. The words translated as *suitable partner* have also been translated as *fitting helpmate* or *fitting helper*. These translations all give the impression of woman being an adjunct to man--perhaps a needed thing as a servant would be, or a slave, or a handyman.

However, certain scholars maintain there has been a faulty translation from the Hebrew. Professor R. D. Freeman in the Biblical Archeology Review makes a good case that *fitting helpmate*, and similar phrases, are mistranslations of *ezer kenegdo*. He points out that the word *ezer* is a combination of two roots--one meaning *to rescue* or *to save*, and the other meaning *to be strong*. He shows that *ezer* occurs twenty-one times in the Hebrew Bible, and is customarily translated as *savior* or *strength* as it is in Psalm 68:34: "*His majesty is upon Israel, and his strength is in the heavens.*" The word *kenegdo* appears only in Genesis. However, the word appears in later rabbinical writings and is translated as *equal* as in the saying: "*The study of the Torah is equal to all the other commandments.*" Professor Freedman insists there is no basis for translating *kenegdo* as *fit* or *appropriate*. Essentially it carries the concept of *equal*. Therefore, he would conclude that the text in

Genesis ought to read: *"The Lord God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make an 'equal strength' (or power) for him."* Would Jesus be pleased with such an interpretation? Perhaps!

We see in this question about divorce that Jesus returns to a related text in Genesis, and declares that marriage was of the natural order ordained by God. Marriage lay beyond the jurisdiction of man. He replied to the Pharisees:

*"Have you not read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and declared, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall become as one.' Thus they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, let no man separate what God has joined." They said to him, "Then why did Moses command divorce and the promulgation of a divorce decree?" "Because of your stubbornness Moses let you divorce your wives," he replied; "But at the beginning it was not that way. I now say to you, whoever divorces his wife (lewd conduct is a separate case) and marries commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."* Mt. 19:4-9

Interpreting the Divine Will of the Creator, Jesus forbids divorce. He teaches that divorce and remarriage constitutes adultery. Since this decision is based upon the original Will of God--the Church has interpreted that this decree binds all mankind and not only Christians. The earliest written scripture that speaks on this subject would be Paul's first letter to the Corinthians written in the fifties. Paul clearly stated there:

*To those now married, however, I give this command (though it is not mine; it is the Lord's): a wife must not separate from her husband. If she does separate, she must either remain single or become reconciled to him again. Similarly, a husband must not divorce his wife.* I Cor. 7:10-11

It does appear in verse fifteen of this same chapter, that Paul permitted an exception to the general rule. This has been called the Pauline Privilege. (To anyone who wishes to pursue this question further, it is suggested that they consult the study in First Corinthians--it is dealt with there along with the present Church's teaching on divorce and re-marriage.)

There has been much discussion over the statement in Matthew: "*lewd conduct is a separate case.*" This has been interpreted in the Greek Orthodox Church, and in many Protestant communities, to mean that divorce and remarriage is permitted in cases of adultery. Within the Roman Catholic Church it has been interpreted to mean divorce is permitted but not remarriage. However, more and more scholars today insist that it is not an exception to the rule of no-divorce. They insist that the Greek word *porneia*, translated *adultery*, refers not to adultery but to incestuous relationships. Matthew did not wish the teachings of Jesus concerning no-divorce to be applied to incestuous marriages. Such marriages--even though legal--would be naturally invalid, and morally should be dissolved.

We do know there was a shock reaction on the part of the Apostles to this teaching of Jesus.

*His disciples said to him, "If that is the case between man and wife, it is better not to marry." He said: "Not everyone can accept this teaching, only those to whom it is given to do so. Some men are incapable of sexual activity from birth; some have been deliberately made so; and some there are who have freely renounced sex for the sake of God's reign. Let him accept this teaching who can."*

*Mt. 19:10-12*

Scholars point out that most of the Rabbis in Israel were divided among the schools of Hillel and Shammai. We know that the Apostles were surprised at Jesus' answer and it led them to think "*If that is the case between man and wife, it is better not to marry.*" It would have been no surprise to them if Jesus agreed with the stricter interpretation of the School of Shammai, which permitted divorce in case of adultery. The surprise came because Jesus rejected both schools of thought. Jesus taught: no divorce and no remarriage. Indeed, Jesus leads the way not only to Jerusalem but to the Cross.

## CHAPTER 19

### FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

#### INTRODUCTION

When Jesus proclaimed the indissolubility of marriage He confirmed the natural foundation for human society, a foundation that rested upon the Will of the Creator. When Jesus added His personal affirmation—ending the dispensation granted by Moses—“*I now say to you,*” Jesus made marriage a Sacrament for the Christian Community and recognized the Christian Family as a vital dimension of the kingdom of God on earth. Christian couples are joined in marriage in the Name of Jesus Christ, and their married lives are sanctified through the Presence of the Holy Spirit. The children of such unions are called “*holy*” by Paul. In the mind of Paul, the presence of one Christian in a marriage brings holiness to the marriage:

*The unbelieving husband is consecrated by his believing wife; the unbelieving wife is consecrated by her believing husband. If it were otherwise, your children should be unclean; but as it is, they are holy.*

*I Cor. 7:14*

The author of Ephesians compared the consecrated marital union of Christians to Jesus Christ’s union with His Church. Christian Marriage becomes a visible sign symbolizing Christ’s eternal union with the Church. The members of the Church, as with a married couple, have become one with Christ and they cannot be divided—“*for we are members of his body (Eph. 5:30).*” The love of Christ for the members of the Church becomes love’s ideal in Christian Marriage: A husband should love his wife in the same manner Christ loves the Church, and a wife should show the same respect to her husband that the Church shows to Christ (see Eph. 5:32-33). Sanctification in married life is achieved when married couples are sincerely committed to achieving this ideal.

It is not by chance that Matthew immediately follows the teaching on divorce with an incident that involves Jesus and His apostles with children. Children are the natural fruit of marriage, and their complete nourishment and maturity depends upon the stability of marriage. Within this recorded

incident the Church is taught the relationship between children and Jesus, and therefore, the relationship between children and the Church. It happened on one occasion that:

*. . . children were brought to him so that he could place his hands on them in prayer. The disciples began to scold them, but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me. Do not hinder them. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these." And he laid his hands on their heads before he left that place.* *Mt. 19:13-15*

From this incident we are taught that the adults--in this case, the Apostles--must not impede the little children from coming to Jesus. They must not impede the children from becoming part of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Children born to Christian parents "*are holy*" which implies they are able to be consecrated to God. In the case of adults, where the problem of personal sin exists, repentance and conversion is demanded before entrance into the Church. In the case of a small child, this is not necessary. However, many adults in their adult-importance seek to keep the little ones from baptism. The children, according to Jesus, are in the perfect condition to receive into their hearts the Kingdom of God. Their little souls, like soft wax, readily receive the imprint of their Savior. Remember Jesus' words to the Twelve:

*I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God.* *Mt. 18:3*

No true Jew would ever think of not circumcising his children. The Jews believed that by obeying the commandment to Abraham and observing this ritual they incorporated their children into the people of God. They firmly believed that, from that moment, their children shared in the divine promises made to Abraham. When their children reached twelve they publicly professed and confirmed their faith in the God of Israel. The child in faith then became an adult in faith. Any Christian who properly understands the nature of original sin as taught by Paul in Romans, and understands the teaching of Jesus to Nicodemus, and knows what John meant when he said, "*We know that we belong to God, while the whole world is under the evil one (I Jn.5:19),*" will take his child in great haste to the baptismal font to receive new birth in water and the Holy Spirit, and to cover his person with the protective Blood of the Lamb. Let it never be said in the Christian Community that the Jews had more faith in Yahweh's

words to Moses than Christians have in Jesus' words to His disciples. The words to Peter apply to many within the Christian Community: "*You are not judging by God's standards but by man's (Mt. 16:23).*"

Before we leave this place in Matthew's narration, we need to note that Jesus is dealing with membership in the Church, requirements for membership, and the internal and external lives of those members of the Church. After entrance into the Church, members have certain moral obligations and responsibilities. These things are not optional, for they are the means to confirm one's commitment to eternal life; the neglect and rejection of them is the means of forfeiting one's eternal life. Jesus emphasizes certain indispensable virtues to be present within the disciples--repentance, prayerfulness, forgiveness of enemies and brothers, fraternal correction--which bespeaks of care and concern for the souls of others, and fidelity to the marriage covenant. He desires Christians to possess the simplicity and humility of children in their relationship with the heavenly Father. We have to remember, as members of the Christian Community, there is a Christian Morality that guides our lives, and the conforming of our lives to it is not optional--that is, if we truly desire to be living members, now and forever, in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' teaching implies that there will always be a lot of "dead wood" that eventually will be removed from the Church and burned. Only the person who hears the Word of God and puts it into practice will remain a recognized member in the eternal family of Jesus.

Christians today must be very conscious of, and alerted to the fact that they do not live in a Christian world. Presently, society maintains only a slight veneer of Christianity. Beneath the veneer covering, lays sheer paganism in full worship of its idols. Most Christians are daily being exposed to the poisonous doctrines of paganism through the mass media, and through daily contact with its disciples. One needs to be inoculated in order to be insured against an infectious environment. The best inoculation is to be grounded in Christian Truth and rooted in Christian Holiness. If Christian children are not immunized they will become helpless victims of their environment; soon many will be no more than nominally Christian.

Not only is there danger without, but there is danger within as well. Many strange doctrines are put forward as being compatible with the teachings of Jesus Christ. Recently a Catholic biblical scholar was quoted as saying, "*You can favor abortion and be a good Catholic.*" If that is true, we are forced to

agree with many enemies of the Catholic Church, that many "good Catholics" will go to Hell. Paul taught—"From your own number, men will present themselves distorting the truth and leading astray any who follow them (Acts 20:30)." Jesus foretold that false prophets and teachers--savage wolves in sheep clothing--will arise within the Church. Apparently, some of the time these wolves appear in the guise of "prominent biblical scholars," and at other times as "soul saving" evangelists. Jesus said, "Be on your guard (Mt. 7:15)." Part of being on one's guard is the ability to tell the wolves from the sheep.

Jesus spoke of things that make people impure and unacceptable in God's eyes. On one occasion Jesus said:

*From the mind stem evil designs--murder, adulterous conduct, fornication, stealing, false witness, blasphemy. These are the things that make a man impure.* Mt. 15:19-20

Paul wrote the Corinthians:

*Can you not realize that the unholy will not fall heir to the kingdom of God? Do not deceive yourselves: no fornicators, idolaters, or adulterers, no sodomites, thieves, misers, or drunkards, no slanderers or robbers will inherit God's kingdom.* I Cor. 6:9-10

Paul called a spade a spade--a sin a sin, and not a neurosis or an environmental influence. It is one thing to sin and call it sin; herein lies a foundation for repentance and salvation. Concerning sins and sinners, Paul said to the Corinthians:

*And such were some of you; but you have been washed, consecrated, justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.* I Cor. 6:11

People within the Christian Community will fall into sin because of scandal and temptation, and because of weakness and ignorance. These, the Church must look upon with compassion and pity, and extend to them the mercy of Christ that they may once again be "washed, consecrated, justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."



Nevertheless, membership in the Church calls us to a Christian ideal established by Jesus that must not be eclipsed by worldliness, nor by the “*smoke of Satan*,” nor lessen because of human weakness. The Love of God, poured out in the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit, urges them daily to strive for this ideal. Each day may have to end in repentance but each new dawn brings a new day in which to begin anew the love of Christ and the love of neighbor.

Jesus calls the married to a pure monogamous relationship in which they valiantly strive to die to self in order to live in the love and respect that Jesus urges them to incarnate in their marital relationship. Children of such marriages are called to the obedience of Christ in the name of Jesus.

Scriptures urge them:

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is what is expected of you. “Honor your father and mother” is the first commandment to carry a promise with it—“that it may go well with you, and that you may have long life on the earth.”*

*Eph. 6:1-3*

As for the young people in the Church, Paul wrote to Titus, “*Tell the young men to keep themselves completely under control (Ti. 2:6).*” The Scriptures make it clear that each Christian is required to live chastely according to his state in life. Young Christians--and all those not married--are expected, as Christian people, to live a life of chaste celibacy until they are married. As Paul wrote to Timothy: “*What we are aiming at...is the life that springs from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith (I Tim. 1:5).*” Jesus indicated that some would be called to live a chaste celibate life: “*Some because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever can ought to accept it (Mt. 19:12).*”

As we know, in the Roman Rite, the Catholic Church requires celibacy as a requirement of ordination to the priesthood. A person desiring to become a priest must take a perpetual vow of celibacy before ordination, which implies a life of chastity. St. Paul advocated and practiced such celibacy. It became an established discipline in the Western Church toward the end of the 6th century, when Pope Gregory the Great imposed it on all clerics in major orders. Among Catholics of most Eastern Rites, many of the clergy are married in accordance with the common tradition in the East.

A traditional teaching of the Church has been that God gives to each person the necessary grace to live the vocation to which he or she is called. If a person receives a vocation to the priesthood, it is presumed he will receive the divine grace to live a chaste celibate life. Much is being said today, both pro and con, about this Church discipline. The life of celibacy is not receiving a great deal of admirable treatment in our world today--within or out of the Church. On the pro-side of celibacy I would like to call on the witness of an unbiased man--certainly as far as the position of the Church is concerned. Professedly he was Hindu. Some believed he was a "closet-case Christian." He would certainly, at least, fit Karl Rainer's definition of an "implied Christian," (one who does not profess external membership in the Christian Church, but whose external conduct implies his Christianity). The witness is Mohandas K. Gandhi. In India they called him *Mahatma* which means *great soul*.

In his autobiography, subtitled "*The Story of My Experiments With Truth*," begun around 1926 at the age of fifty-six, he writes:

*I think it is the height of ignorance to believe that the sexual act is an independent function necessary like sleeping or eating. I had been wedded to a monogamous ideal ever since my marriage, faithfulness to my wife being part of the love of truth.*

They had four children of which the first died shortly after birth. While in South Africa, Gandhi, being a lawyer, was drawn more and more into the battle for social justice for the Indians living in South Africa. The desire to give himself more completely to the service of the community increased. However, he experienced a conflict between his desire to serve his people and his position as head of a household:

*It became my conviction that procreation and the consequent care of children were inconsistent with public service....the idea flashed upon me that if I wanted to devote myself to the service of the community in this manner, I must relinquish the desire for children and wealth. Without the observance of celibacy, service of the family would be inconsistent with service of the community. With celibacy, they would be perfectly consistent.*

At this point Gandhi saw only the utilitarian aspect of a life of celibacy and not its personal spiritual value:

*I had not realized then how indispensable it was for self-realization, but I clearly saw that one aspiring to serve humanity with his whole soul could not do without it. It was borne in upon me that I should have more and more occasions for service of the kind I was rendering, and that I should find myself unequal to my task if I were engaged in the pleasures of family life and in the propagation and rearing of children.*

A growing desire to practice celibacy was taking root in his soul but simultaneously he was filled with fears and doubts:

*The importance of the vows grew upon me more clearly than ever before. I realized that a vow, far from closing the door to real freedom, opened it. Up to this time I had not met with success because the will had been lacking, because I had had no faith in myself, no faith in the grace of God, and therefore, my mind had been tossed on the boisterous sea of doubt. I realized that in refusing to take a vow man was drawn into temptation, and that to be bound by a vow was like a passage from libertinism to a real monogamous marriage. But I had great difficulty in making the final resolve. I had not the necessary strength. How was I to control my passions? The elimination of carnal relationship with one's wife seemed, then, a strange thing. But I launched forth, with faith, in the sustaining power of God.*

Through grace his doubts dissolved: "I took the plunge--the vow to observe celibacy for life. After full discussion and mature deliberation I took the vow in 1906." Gandhi was thirty-six years of age at the time.

However, living the vow was another thing. Gandhi realized it could not be kept without vigilant self-control, and there could be no self-control without self-discipline:

*The importance of the vow is being more and more borne in upon me; Man is man because he is capable of, and only in so far as he exercises self-restraint. What formerly appeared to me to be extravagant praise of celibacy in our religious books seems now, with increasing clearness every day, to be absolutely proper and founded on experience.*

Gandhi grew in awareness and appreciation of his vow. He began to realize the internal qualities of celibacy. There is an effect and affect upon the entire person--not merely in relationship to the body and its desires:

*I saw that celibacy, which is so full of wonderful potency, is by no means an easy affair, and certainly not a mere matter of the body. It begins with bodily restraint, but does not end there. The perfection of it precludes even an impure thought. Many aspirants fail because in the use of their other senses they want to carry on like those who are not celibates. — There should be a clear line between the life of a celibate and of one who is not.*

Celibacy becomes more a wholehearted concern for Gandhi. Discipline must not be extended only to the body:

*Celibacy is impossible to attain by limited effort. For many it must remain only as an ideal. Mind is at the root of all sensuality. So long as thought is not under complete control of the will, celibacy in its fullness is absent. Celibacy means control of the senses in thought, word and deed.*

Gandhi clearly saw the importance of purity of mind:

*Mind is the principal thing. A mind consciously unclean cannot be cleansed by fasting. Modification in diet has no effect on it. The concupiscence of the mind cannot be rooted out except by intense self-examination, surrender to God and, lastly, grace. But there is an intimate connection between the mind and the body. My experience teaches me that, for those whose minds are working towards self-restraint, dietetic restrictions and fasting are very helpful. In fact, without their help, concupiscence cannot be completely rooted out of the mind. Physical fasting that is not accompanied by mental fasting is bound to end in hypocrisy and disaster.*

Gandhi never underestimated the effort and work demanded in order to achieve both external and internal purity:

*I realized that such celibacy was impossible to attain by mere human effort. To conquer the subtle passions seems to me to be*

*far harder than the physical conquest of the world by the force of arms.*

Gandhi believed that what human effort alone could not achieve the grace of God and human effort could achieve:

*Nevertheless the existence of God within makes even control of the mind possible. Let no one think that it is impossible because it is difficult. Meanwhile, let me make it clear that those who desire to observe celibacy with a view to realizing God, need not despair, provided their faith in God is equal to their confidence in their own effort; therefore, His name and His grace are the last resource of the aspirant.*

Looking back over his years as a celibate Gandhi observed:

*As I look back upon the twenty years of the vow, I am filled with pleasure and wonderment. The more or less successful practice of self-control had been going on since 1901. But the freedom and joy that came to me after taking the vow had never been experienced before 1906. Before the vow I had been open to being overcome by temptation at any moment. But the vow was a sure shield against temptation. Every day of the vow has taken me nearer the knowledge that in "celibacy" lays the protection to the body, the mind and the soul. For "celibacy" was no process of hard penance, it was a matter of consolation and joy. Every day revealed a fresh beauty in it. But if it was a matter of ever-increasing joy, let no one believe that it was an easy thing for me. Even when I am past fifty-six years of age, I realize how hard a thing it is. Every day I realize more and more that it is like walking on the sword's edge, and I see at every moment the necessity for eternal vigilance.*

As mentioned earlier, Gandhi realized that the perfect chastity he desired ultimately extended to his entire person--to purity of mind and heart. He confessed the difficulty and failure to gain complete purity of thought:

*For me the observance of even bodily celibacy has been full of difficulties. Today I may say that I feel myself fairly safe, but I have yet to achieve complete mastery over thought, which is so essential.*

*Not that the will or effort is lacking....I have no doubt that there is a key to lock out undesirable thoughts, but every one has to find it out for himself. Saints and seers have left their experiences for us, but they have given us no infallible and universal prescription. For perfection of freedom from error comes only from grace....Without an unreserved surrender to His grace, complete mastery over thought is impossible. This is the teaching of every great book of religion, and I am realizing the truth of it every moment of my striving after that perfect celibacy.*

Gandhi goes on to stress the ultimate end and reward of both celibacy and the virtue of chastity:

*God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart. Self-purification therefore must mean purification in all the walks of life; and purification being highly infectious, purification of oneself necessarily leads to the purification of one's surroundings.*

Gandhi ends his autobiography with a statement that would have been dear to the heart of Christ:

*I know that I have still before me a difficult path to traverse. I must reduce myself to zero. So long as a man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him. (Quotations taken from "An Autobiography by Mohandas K. Gandhi, Beacon Press, Boston, 1957)*

And indeed, Jesus would have replied to Mahatma Gandhi: "*You are not far from the Kingdom of God!*"

## THE IMPORTANT QUESTION

Matthew records an episode in which a man came to Jesus and asked a most important question concerning what a person must do to possess eternal life. The question dealt with salvation--the very heart of the Gospel message. Both Mark and Luke record the incident, and Luke refers to the man as "*one of the ruling class.*" This man could be seen as a symbol for those who rejected Jesus for reasons other than did the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. We read:

*Another time a man came up to him and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to possess everlasting life?" He answered, "Why do you question me about what is good? There is One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." "Which ones?" He asked. Jesus replied, "'You shall not kill'; 'You shall not commit adultery'; 'You shall not steal'; 'You shall not bear false witness'; 'Honor your father and your mother'; and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I need to do further?" Jesus told him, "If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor. You will then have treasure in heaven. Afterwards, come back and follow me." Hearing these words, the young man went away sad, for his possessions were many.*

*Mt. 19:16-22*

As Matthew records the incident, the man addressed Jesus simply as "*Teacher.*" The term itself signified a lack of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The man looked upon Jesus as a Jewish rabbi. Jesus reacted negatively to the man's question. He took exception to the careless use of the concept "*good.*" Jesus' reply seems to imply that if He is no more than a teacher He is no more qualified to answer his question than any other rabbi.

Jesus centered in upon the word "*good.*" "*Why do you question me about what is good?*" The means to salvation is not a *what*. It is not a matter of a *good thing*. "*There is One who is good.*" The means to salvation is a *Who-God*, who is *good*; it is a matter of the *Good God*. Jesus teaches that *goodness* is a characteristic of God. He ties *good* together with *God*, and both with commandments and salvation.

The man is met, wherein he stands, steeped in traditional Judaism which sees salvation being achieved through good works. Jesus told the man—"keep the commandments." Of course he meant not only the letter but the spirit. Since the Commandments expressed the Will of God they expressed the love of God for people. Jesus urged the man to enter into the Will of God--into the very Heart of God. He is instructed, not so much to do well, but to enter into goodness--to become godly.

The man's questions implied the spirit of legalism. He asked in the first question what good must "*I do*" to possess everlasting life. The emphasis is upon the "*I do.*" The question implied everlasting life could be earned by

man's good works which makes him his own personal savior. What was necessary was to accomplish the proper works. This was at the heart of Pharisaic spirituality. The difference between this man and the Pharisees was his doubt about the good to be done. The Pharisees had no doubt that they knew and accomplished the works of salvation, and were the "saved."

In response to Jesus' "keep the Commandments," the man replied, "Which ones?" If he had truly possessed the spirit behind the law there would have been no question concerning "Which ones?" In His reply--Jesus enumerated four commandments which dealt primarily with human relationships to which Jesus added the commandment which summed up the four and expressed the very spirit of the commandments as well: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus is reinforcing the personal aspect of salvation.

The answer implied that salvation involved a loving interpersonal relationship. To love one's neighbor as oneself would truly be entering into God's energy--into the flow of God's heart. The man's response--"what do I need to do further?" indicated a lack of any in-depth understanding of God's commandment. His conscious awareness of "I have kept all of these" flowed from his legal observance of the law. He still desired to know if there was something more he *could* do to ensure his salvation. Jesus' response implied that there was nothing more he *could* do to gain eternal life. Jesus demonstrated this by asking of him the very thing he lacked the power and grace to accomplish. He demanded a radical, in-the-spirit, fulfillment of the commandment of love of neighbor: "If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven."

Such charity did not essentially imply *doing* something, but *being* someone. For the man to comply with what Jesus demanded would involve conversion--a total change of his life. What would be more difficult for a very rich man than to dispossess himself of all his riches and give them to the poor! The man's giving his wealth to the poor does not seem to be the essential point, but rather, the stripping of himself down to nothing, and reducing himself to zero--becoming one of the "anawim" who depend daily upon the heavenly Father. His wealth was not his problem, but his attachment to it was a symptom of the spiritual problem. He could not put radical trust and confidence in God. He wanted salvation but not on the radical terms stated by Jesus. He did not possess the power to radically change his life in order to be saved. In truth, he could do nothing



*“to possess everlasting life.”* Jesus brings the man to a cold awareness of his true spirituality; he was unwilling to hear the Will of God in his own regard, which demanded his repentance.

This same incident was recorded in an early Christian work called the Gospel to the Hebrews, which was not included in the New Testament. The episode, as narrated in this work, clearly demonstrated the true legalistic spirit of the man in question. When he responded that he had kept the commandments--Jesus responded:

*How can you say that you have observed the law and the prophets? For it is written in the law: You shall love your neighbor as yourself--and behold, many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are clad in filth, dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, and nothing at all goes out of it to any of them.*

The man wanted a work to do and Jesus gave him a work. Jesus does not say that the work will lead to salvation, but only to reward in heaven. The real work is not the giving of the money to the poor--for which he will be rewarded in heaven--but the work that would be necessary in order for him to give his wealth away, that is, the work of repentance that would lead to his salvation. Jesus told him, *“If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor.”*

Now the Greek word translated *perfection* is *teleios*. The word can mean *maturity* when used in relationship to childhood. It can signify *completeness*, which the man signified that he lacked. Often in the past we have looked upon this passage as distinguishing between a state of salvation, and a state of Christian perfection, which itself implies there are two categories of Christians: those merely *saved* and those *saved and perfected*. However, many scholars maintain that this text does not imply a distinction between what must be done to gain eternal life and what must be done to seek perfection. *Teleios*, as used by Matthew, implies being *true to God—true to the Covenant*. It expresses more the concept of justice, and signifies the person who wholeheartedly accomplishes the Will of God. It is exactly the same requirement that Jesus demands of any person who desires to come to salvation.

On one other occasion in this Gospel, Matthew uses *teleios*. Its usage in the two texts is closely tied together. It has been suggested that its first usage best interprets its usage in this text. In Chapter Five Jesus tells his disciples: "*In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48).*" This sentence followed upon Jesus' commanding His disciples to love those who did not love them--even their enemies which "*will prove that you are sons of your heavenly Father, for his sun shines on the bad and the good, he rains on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45).*" When Jesus speaks of seeking "*perfection,*" He is speaking of that charity of the Father that He calls all His disciples to embrace. Such a charity calls every human heart to repentance.

The man had asked—"Teacher, what good must I do to possess everlasting life?" Summarily, Jesus told him two things. The man was told to repent--which, in his case, would have been demonstrated by his heroic charity, but that was not all. The ultimate demand of God's Will that truly produces perfection is that sacrificial following of Christ on the way to His Cross. Jesus' ultimate answer to the question was: "*Come back and follow me.*" The answers are rejected and the invitation refused. What could be the only end-result of such a refusal? "*The young man went away sad.*" He went away sad with his many possessions. Once Jesus asked the question: "*What profit would a man show if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process (Mt. 16:26)?*"

### THE DANGERS OF WEALTH

As the sad man departed with his burden of wealth, Jesus turned to His disciples and said:

*. . . I assure you; only with difficulty will a rich man enter into the kingdom of God. I repeat what I said: it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*  
*Mt. 19:23-24*

Only shortly before, the Lord had said to the Apostles: "*I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 18:3).*" It is a safe presumption to say there exists a relationship between the two statements. Apparently something about being a rich person militates strongly against becoming like a "*little child.*" It was,

presumably, to a rich man, Nicodemus, that Jesus spoke about the necessity of being "*born again.*"

*I solemnly assure you, no one can see the reign of God unless he is begotten from above....no one can enter into God's kingdom without being begotten of water and Spirit.* Jn. 3:3,5

According to the minds of the time, material possessions such as wealth signified the blessings of Yahweh upon a person. Their presence in the life of a person signified Yahweh's favor rested upon the person. The Apostles would have been of such a mind as to have seen the rich as the favorites of God. Therefore, when Jesus said it was next to impossible for such a one to be saved, the statement shocked the Apostles:

*....They were completely overwhelmed, and exclaimed, "...Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For man it is impossible; but for God all things are possible."* Mt. 19:25-26

Wealth itself was not an intrinsic obstacle to becoming a disciple of Jesus. Men such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were wealthy disciples. The tax collector, Zacchaeus of Jericho, was a wealthy man who made a generous restitution by dispersing a great deal of money, but he apparently remained a wealthy man. Jesus said to him: "*Today salvation has come to this house, for this is what it means to be a son of Abraham (Lk 19:9).*"

However, wealth has the tendency to make a man trust in his silver and gold rather than in his God. Wealth brings prestige and power, which trust in God often does not. We saw what happened when Jesus asked a wealthy man to give up his possessions and put his trust in God and in Jesus. Having a great deal of wealth, social prestige and power are obstacles to developing those characteristics which make one a *little one*. When a person places his trust in his "silver and gold," his insecurity can lead to greed, selfishness, and injustice. There is not enough gold to make a man absolutely secure. Also, one does not possess things; one is possessed *by* things--possessed *with* them. Wherever is your treasure--there is your heart. Great wealth often leaves little time for anything else but caring for one's wealth. All the energy and time of life can be spent upon those treasures that rust and which moths destroy. Because one is rich here upon earth one could enter eternity soul-poor, with neither a merit nor grace to one's name. Luke wrote of such a man who said to himself:

*“You have blessings in reserve for years to come. Relax! Eat heartily, drink well. Enjoy yourself.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life shall be required of you. To whom will all this piled-up wealth go?” That is the way it works with the man who grows rich for himself instead of growing rich in the sight of God.*

*Lk. 12:19-21*

We find a very balanced presentation of this subject in Paul's first letter to Timothy. It serves as a very good interpretation to Jesus' intent when He warned about wealth. Paul wrote:

*There is, of course, great gain in religion, provided one is content with a sufficiency. We brought nothing into this world, nor have we the power to take anything out. If we have food and clothing we have all that we need. Those who want to be rich are falling into temptations and a trap. They are letting themselves be captured by foolish and harmful desires which drag men down to ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all evil. Some men in their passion for it have strayed from the faith, and have come to grief amid great pain. Man of God that you are, flee from all this. Instead, seek after integrity, piety, faith, love, steadfastness, and a gentle spirit...tell those who are rich in this world's goods not to be proud, and not to rely on so uncertain a thing as wealth. Let them trust in the God who provides us richly with all things for our use. Charge them to do good, to be rich in good works and generous, sharing what they have. Thus will they build a secure foundation for the future, for receiving that life which is life indeed.*

*I Tim. 6:6-11,17-19*

### REWARDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Apparently, the Apostles panicked when they heard the news about the near impossibility of the rich man being saved. If this was the case with those so generously blessed by Yahweh, where did *they* stand in relationship to salvation? Apparently Jesus' look reassured them that they were safe. With this fear out of the way they were able to reflect upon Jesus' words to the rich man: *“You will then have treasure in heaven.”* The treasure in heaven would result from his distributing his earthly treasure among the poor. This is not speaking about salvation but about the reward the saved will receive in heaven. Man's good works do not merit salvation but they do

merit eternal rewards. Things will not be the same nor equal in heaven. Star will differ from star, and some will shine in eternity more gloriously because of their good works upon earth. There is one measure for greatness here on earth and there is another measure for greatness in the Kingdom of God. So Jesus says—*“Many who are first shall come last, and the last shall come first (Mt. 14:30).”*

It was at this time that Peter asked—in the name of the Apostles--what they could expect for giving up everything and following Jesus. Matthew wrote: *“Then it was Peter's turn to say to him: ‘Here we have put everything aside to follow you. What can we expect from it?’ (Mt. 19:27).”* Jesus told these twelve Apostles that when the kingdom of God comes in its fullness, they would sit upon thrones with Christ Himself. They would be the judges over Israel.

*I give you my solemn word, in the new age when the Son of Man takes his seat upon a throne befitting his glory, you who have followed me shall likewise take your places upon twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel*  
*Mt. 19:28*

It is an awesome thing to reflect upon, that one of those Twelve was Judas and that solemn promise would be rescinded in his case. As we read in Acts: *“He was one of our numbers and he had been given a share in this ministry of ours. ‘May another take his office.’ (Acts 1:17,20).”* Judas followed Jesus a long time and came a long way with Him but he would not follow Him to the Cross.

After Jesus' solemn promise to the Twelve, He turned His attention to all His disciples and He promised that:

*....everyone who has given up home, brothers or sisters, father or mother, wife or children or property for my sake will receive many times as much and inherit everlasting life.*  
*Mt. 19:29*

The Greek text implies they will receive a hundredfold return from the Lord. The return is not to be taken literally. The return will not be in kind but something better--joy; the joy and happiness the sacrificed things would have brought to the disciples will return to them a hundredfold. We are told that those who do *“come back and follow”* Jesus will *“inherit eternal life”* and *“have treasure in heaven.”*

## LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

Following this discussion of the rewards to be received, and our Lord's revelation that some who are now first will find themselves among the least, Jesus relates a parable in which He compares things in the kingdom of God to an owner of a vineyard. Matthew records:

*The reign of God is like the case of the owner of an estate who went out at dawn to hire workmen for his vineyard. After reaching an agreement with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them out to his vineyard.* *Mt. 20:1-2*

The owner of the vineyard enters into a contract with these men--they make a covenant. The owner again goes to the market place and hires people to go into his vineyard at 9 A.M., 12 P.M. and 3 P.M. To these latter he merely said, "...I will pay you whatever is fair (Mt. 20:4)." Finally, he goes back at five o'clock and says to some others:

*"Why have you been standing here idle all day?" "No one has hired us," they said to him. He said, "You go to the vineyard too."* *Mt. 20:6-7*

Now the work day began at 6 A.M. and ended at 6 P.M., which began the new day. When time came to pay the workers, the owner instructed the foreman to pay the last first, and to give each and every worker a denarius. This was the daily wage sufficient to supply the worker and his family with the necessities of life. Of course, this delighted the late-comers, but angered the earlier workers. The owner of the vineyard pointed out that they had no cause for anger--no injustice had been done. They received what their contract specified. As for the last receiving the same--that was the owner's free choice; it indicated mercy and compassion upon these poor people. The owner questioned the anger of the earlier workers--was its source an "evil eye," which looked with malice and envy upon the good fortune of others? They were disturbed, not over what they received, but what others received. The owner says:

*"I am free to do as I please with my money, am I not? Or are you envious because I am generous (good)?" The parable concludes: "Thus the last shall be first and the first shall be last."* *Mt. 20:15-16*

The most obvious application of the parable would be to Israel and the Gentiles. In the Old Testament, a vineyard was a symbol of Israel. Isaiah wrote: "*The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his cherished plant (Is. 5:7).*" Israel, the covenant people, the workers in the vineyard from the dawn, are contrasted with the eleventh hour crowd--those Gentiles who are now being admitted into the People of God on an equal status and in full standing with the Israelites. Paul speaks in Acts of the jealousy and malice of the Jews, because the Gentiles are being received into the kingdom of heaven. We know the Christian Jews within the Apostolic Church faced a real crisis over the admission of Gentiles into the Church on equal footing with the Jewish Christians. This difficulty was resolved in a fashion analogous to the situation in the parable of the vineyard workers.

It has been said that a parable may have several levels of meaning and may look in more than one direction. It may look back to Israel and it may look forward to the New Israel--that apostolic community so concerned over its position and reward. To these, the parable proclaims that early members in the church have no privileged standing within the Christian Community. The reign of God--the Church--does not belong any more to the original members, even the apostles, than it does to its newest member. In the eyes of God, all who are in Christ are one. As Paul wrote to the Galatians:

*Each one of you is a son of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with him. There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.*  
Gal. 3:26-28

Man has no appeal against the free exercise of God's Will. God is compassionate and merciful, and His Love cannot be confined to the narrow limits of human justice. As Paul wrote the Romans:

*What are we to say, then? That God is unjust? Not at all! He says to Moses, "I will show mercy to whomever I choose; I will have pity on whomever I wish." So it is not a question of man's willing or doing but of God's mercy....In other words, God has mercy on whom he wishes.*  
Rom. 9:14-16,18

Those who seek to calculate the action of God will indeed be surprised. Perhaps some, in their own case, can be somewhat accurate. The Lord did

promise to measure to us as we have measured to others. Those who begrudge the mercy of God to the "last hour penitent" and want justice, justice *they* may receive! The over-flowing gratitude and the exceeding joy of the lost, who find themselves, saved may place them in a prestigious place in the Kingdom of God, whereas the "sour grapes" of those who bore the heat of the day may place them last.

In the days of old, the Israelites gathered upon the east shore of the River Jordan with Joshua in preparation for their entrance into the Holy Land. Four days before the Passover, they crossed the Jordan and encamped before Jericho. There on the plains of Jericho "*...they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month (Jos. 5:10).*" On the day after the Passover, "*...No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan (Jos. 5:12).*" The day following the Passover, the siege of Jericho and the Promised Land began under the leadership of Joshua, whose name (*Yehosea*) means *Yahweh is Salvation*.

Jesus and His disciples are gathered together at the same time of year, and at approximately the same place. They prepare to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. As we have studied, Jesus' name is a form of Joshua, and means *Yahweh is Salvation*. This gospel indeed presents to us the New Joshua leading the New Israel to the true--the eternal--Promised Land of the Father. Matthew relates:

*As Jesus was starting to go up to Jerusalem, he took the Twelve aside on the road and said to them: "We are going up to Jerusalem now. There the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, who will condemn him to death. They will turn him over to the Gentiles, to be made sport of and flogged and crucified. But on the third day he will be raised up."*

*Mt.20:18-19*

Within the picture presented, Jesus takes them off the main Way to the side of the road, and explains in detail the Way He must go--He explains the coming campaign to them. Details are added to the Passion, the participation of the Gentiles, and His death by crucifixion. He fully perceived it all and, as Luke expressed:



*As the time approached when he was to be taken from this world, he firmly resolved to proceed toward Jerusalem.* Lk. 9:51

As Isaiah expressed it:

*I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.* Is. 50:7

However, the Apostles, symbolically, remain on the side of the road. They do not go His Way. This is demonstrated in the following episode in which the mother of John and James comes to Jesus, seeking seats of honor for her two sons within the kingdom:

*“Promise me that these sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and the other at your left, in your kingdom.” In reply Jesus said: “You do not know what you are asking.”* Mt. 20:22

(Many people pray the same way. Their request was like praying for heroic patience and then they discover that they prayed for heroic sufferings--the only dimension in which the prayer could be answered.)

The Lord continued: *“Can you drink of the cup I am to drink of (Mt. 20:22)?”* They promptly answered *“We can”* without knowing, once again, what they were saying. However, Jesus knew well it was the cup of His Passion. These two men would remain disciples, and just as no soldier could follow his general into battle and not expect to share in the sufferings of the war, only such a one could hope to share in the glory of the victory. As we will soon see, Judas refused to share in this cup. And yet, in the end, how bitter was the cup he did drink. Jesus told them:

*From the cup I drink of, you shall drink. But sitting at my right hand or my left is not mine to give. That is for those to whom it has been reserved by my Father.* Mt. 20:23

Jesus remains always in the Will of the Father--demonstrating the attitude of the *little child*. Perhaps these places will go to those who drink from the Lord's cup?

The other ten apostles reacted to this mother's prayer for her two beloved sons in keeping with their temperaments. They "...became indignant at the two brothers (Mt. 20:24)." Jesus patiently explained to them that their behavior, in their relationships with each other and in their positions of leadership, must be patterned upon His example. He tells them if they seek true greatness, they "*must serve the rest (Mt. 20:26).*" If they want to be in the first ranks of glory, they "*must serve the needs of all (Mt. 20:27).*" The pattern Jesus places before them, and the Way He directs them to go, is that of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh who lays down His life that others may come to life. Jesus says to His disciples:

*Such is the case with the Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve, to give "his own life as a ransom for the many."*

*Mt. 20:28*

## CHAPTER 20

### YOUR KING COMES

#### INTRODUCTION

When Jesus confronted the Apostles with particular facts about His coming death, He faced them with a reality beyond their mental comprehension--beyond what their human hearts could bear. Peter perfectly expressed the heart when he cried: "*May you be spared, Master! God forbid that any such thing ever happen to you (Mt. 16:22)!*"

It remains incomprehensible to the human heart how a good God can permit the innocent to suffer. It was unthinkable to the Jewish mind that God could permit evil to touch and violate the sacred humanity of the Messiah. The fact of suffering innocence has been a scandal to many people, impeding their relationship with God. How can it be if God is a good and loving God? Why is it? Only God can give the answer. Perhaps He did in the life of Jesus?

However, can the human mind understand the answer, even if given? Is its heart too opposed to the acceptance of the answer? Seemingly, some things in life can only be accepted--not understood. To Peter, Jesus said: "*....You are not judging by God's standards but by man's (Mt. 16:23).*" But that is the standard by which humans judge. Perhaps for this reason Jesus recommended that we not judge, but accept. What can the human mind do when faced with the acts of inscrutable Divine Wisdom other than suspend judgment? The Lord tells us:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,  
says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high  
are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your  
thoughts*

*Is. 55:8-9*

When Paul reflected upon Israel's rejection of Christ, he could only conclude: God willed it! In the face of this reality he proclaimed:

*How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable his judgments, how unsearchable his ways! For "who has known the mind of the Lord?" Rm. 11:33-34*

The Holy Scriptures reveal the goodness of God: "*There is one who is good (Mt. 19:17).*" It reveals the lovingness of God: "*...God is love (I Jn. 4:8)*" The goodness and lovingness of God are revealed truths, and matters of Christian Faith. The presence of evil, and its frequent triumph over good, give faith a test that it ought to withstand. Trust in God arises from naked faith when the senses, the emotions, and the understanding withdraw support and abandon the soul to reckon with evil. Solely, the Word of God supports faith.

Naked faith sustains the soul amidst its trials and within its agony. It hears: "*Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body and then can do no more.*" It believes and becomes strong. Somehow, in some mysterious fashion, when goodness is confronted head-on by evil, and it does not waver in the face of evil but remains as solid as Gibraltar amidst a sea of evil, it dissipates and destroys the powers of evil. Goodness destroys it by accepting and absorbing it. Whatever object a wave cannot carry along with its forces, dissipates the wave. The immovable rock destroys the power of the wave that pounds upon it. The man who sets his face like flint before the waves of evil is not put to shame, for he conquers evil.

Evil expresses itself in nature and within physical life, but evil is essentially spiritual. Even as evil destroyed the physical body of Christ, it lost the victory. The body was but the battlefield, and battlefields are destroyed in war. The physical life of Christ was not the prize; the soul of Christ was the prize. After the death of Christ, evil never regained the power over humanity that it once possessed. The Scriptures tell us that by His death, Jesus robbed "*the devil, the prince of death, of his power (see Heb. 2:14).*" However, its onslaught against Christ weakened but did not destroy its force. As the author of Hebrews wrote:

*At present we do not see all things thus subject, but we do see Jesus crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death.*

*Heb. 2:8c-9a*

The Evil One recognized Christ as the Victor, and would never again directly encounter Him. For this reason, for a Christian to be "in Christ" assures victory. To step out of Christ invites not only physical evil but spiritual disaster. Even physical evil cannot touch a disciple of Christ unless it is permitted by Him. When Pilate said to Jesus:

*"Do you not know that I have the power to release you and the power to crucify you?" Jesus answered: "You would have no power over me whatever unless it were given you from above."*

*Jn. 19:10*

The Lord said to Paul: *"Do not be afraid. Go on speaking and do not be silenced, for I am with you. No one will attack you or harm you (Acts 18:9-10)."*

Perhaps, as we follow Christ on His way to the Cross we will better understand God who is good and loving, yet permits even evil to befall His children. Maybe in sharing what the good and innocent Jesus endured, our faith will be strengthened so as not to doubt the love and goodness of God if, perchance, evil befalls us, or bad days come upon us. Nevertheless, when we follow Christ, it will be following Light into sheer darkness; amidst such darkness only the Lamp of Faith guides the footstep. Even where there is vision in this world, Paul says *"we see indistinctly"* as one looking through a darkened glass (see I Cor. 13:12).

Jesus, the New Joshua, leads His disciples on to Jerusalem. Truly, Jerusalem becomes His Jericho--the obstacle and the gateway into the Promised Land. Symbolically, the disciples are still off on the side of the road. They cannot *"see"* His Way in order to follow Him; they still remain in a world they understand and can cope with. Matthew illustrates this by James' and John's seeking the honored places in the kingdom immediately following Jesus' last prophecy concerning His coming suffering and death. Matthew relates the episode of the healing of two blind men in Jericho which symbolizes the spiritual blindness of James and John, and, of course, the other ten. The two blind men want to see and they prayed: *"Lord, Son of David, have pity on us! Lord, open our eyes (Mt. 20:31,33)!"*

If the death of Jesus left the disciples completely in the darkness of faith, such a prayer certainly expressed the hearts of the disciples. Their hearts asked, *"Why?"* Their lips prayed, *"Lord, help us to understand."* We are

told that at the request of the two blind men, Jesus was moved with compassion and "...*touched their eyes, and immediately they could see; and they became his followers (Mt. 20:34).*" Could any man have really understood the Way, if Jesus had not shown the Way by walking it first? Only when one could witness the relationship between the sufferings in this world and the glory of the world to come, could one "see" to follow the Way Jesus taught. As the author of Hebrews said:

*At present we do not see all things thus subject, but we do see Jesus crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death.*

When Matthew writes that Jesus was "*moved with compassion,*" he describes the Divine sentiment that motivated Jesus to accept death upon the Cross, and the heavenly Father to Will it, "...*That by his death he might rob the devil, the prince of death, of his power.... (Neb. 2:14).*" When the Apostles beheld Jesus raised from the dead, then they could "see" and understand and commit themselves to the Way. As Matthew records: "...*they could see and they became his followers (Mt. 20:34).*" Reflecting upon the sufferings of Jesus, the author of Hebrews wrote:

*Indeed, it was fitting that when bringing many sons to glory, God, for whom and through whom all things exist, should make their leader (pioneer) in the work of salvation perfect through suffering.*  
*Heb. 2:10*

Perhaps what we must come to see is the relationship between perfection and suffering:

*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*  
*Heb. 5:8-9*

The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was uphill all the way. Pilgrims coming along that road caught their first sight of the city from the Mount of Olives. From its 2,500 foot summit they looked westward across the Kedron Valley upon the gleaming temple 200 feet below. Pilgrims coming from Jericho would have entered the city through the East Gate. Today modern pilgrims look down upon the 16th century wall built by Suleiman. The East Gate, called the Golden Gate, is located in a turret protruding from the eastern wall of the Old City of Jerusalem. The two arched portals of the Golden Gate are

now mortared closed. If you could walk through them you would find yourself on the Temple Mount, located at the southeastern corner of the Old City. The present Golden Gate may date back as far as 638 A.D. Beneath this present Golden Gate lies the gate through which Jesus most probably entered Jerusalem.

### JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM

Jesus intended to enter Jerusalem as the Messiah; He deliberately chose symbols that expressed His messianic role. As the Messiah, Jesus was the King of the Jews, and Jerusalem was His capital city, and its temple symbolized the place where God and man came together. We read in the Scriptures:

*I will dwell within Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain.*

*Zech. 8:3*

A ruler could enter a city on a war horse, which symbolized that he came as a conqueror, or he could enter it upon an ass, which signified he came in peace. A rabbinical tradition existed that held that if Israel became unworthy to receive its Messiah in triumphant glory, He would approach them in humility, riding upon an ass. Matthew reports that when Jesus approached the city:

*Jesus sent off two disciples with the instructions: "Go into the village straight ahead of you and you will immediately find an ass tethered and her colt with her. Untie them and lead them back to me. If anyone says a word to you, say, 'The Master needs them.' Then he will let them go at once."*

*Mt. 21:1-3*

In the mind of the author, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem symbolized that He came to the city as the King of Peace. His entrance into the city recalls the words of the Prophet Zechariah:

*Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass. He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem;*

*The warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.* Zech. 9:9-10

This prophecy will be fulfilled in Jesus and its fulfillment begins with the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. Jesus' symbolic gesture will not be lost upon His expectant disciples; this is the day they have longed for. As the prophet proclaimed:

*That day his feet shall rest upon the Mount of Olives which is opposite Jerusalem to the east....Then the Lord, my God shall come, and all his holy ones with him....On that day, living waters shall flow from Jerusalem....The Lord shall become king over the whole earth; on that day the Lord shall be the only one, and his name the only one....On that day there shall no longer be any merchant in the house of the Lord of hosts.* Zech. 14:4-5,8-9,21c

Matthew relates:

*So the disciples went off and did what Jesus had ordered; they brought the ass and the colt and laid their cloaks on them and he mounted.* Mt. 21:6

It has been pointed out that the creature Jesus rode into Jerusalem was not the burro type donkey with which we are familiar, but a rather large beautiful animal whose coat was creamy white. As Jesus proceeded towards Jerusalem, the people gave Him a royal reception:

*The huge crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while some began to cut branches from the trees and lay them along his path. The groups preceding him as well as those following kept crying out: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"* Mt. 21:8-9

The conduct of the crowd is reminiscent of the feast of Tabernacles at which the people carried branches that they waved in the air, while they sang and shouted "*Hosanna Yahweh.*" The branch itself was called the *hosanna*. The word *hosanna* literally means *Oh save!* The feast of Tabernacles had a historic reference to the Exodus from Egypt and celebrated the Israelites redemption from slavery. *Hosanna to the Son of David!* was a



prayer that God would save the Messiah. The words of the crowd call to mind the words of Psalm 118:

*The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. By the Lord has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it. O Lord, grant salvation! O Lord, grant prosperity! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Join in procession with leafy boughs up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I give thanks to you; O my God, I extol you. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his kindness endures forever.*

*Ps. 118:22-29*

### LORD OF THE TEMPLE

The unexpected arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem with such a tumultuous reception shocked the city into awareness that something extraordinary had occurred. As Matthew expressed it: "As he entered Jerusalem the whole city was stirred to its depths, demanding, 'Who is this?'" (Mt. 21:10)

The word *stirred*, weakly translates *eseisthe*, which can mean *earthquake*. In a word, this event left nothing unmoved. Jesus' coming to Jerusalem was a powerful spiritual visitation, and the vibrations it caused troubled the soul of the city. Perhaps the more sensitive sensed the moment of Jerusalem's judgment. To the question, "Who is this?" the unenlightened crowd, with its undeveloped faith, responded: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee (Mt. 21:11)." However, to the discerning eye, His behavior implied much more. Could this be the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy?

*And suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye. He will sit refining and purifying [silver], and he will purify the sons of Levi...that they may offer due sacrifice to the Lord. Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem will please the Lord....*

*Mal. 3:1-4*

(This prophecy will be fulfilled in Jerusalem when the high priests offer up the life of Jesus upon the Cross.)

On one occasion, Jesus said to the Pharisees and to the Apostles, *"I assure you, there is something greater than the temple here (Mt. 12:6)."* After His entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus proceeded immediately to the temple--the very heart of Jerusalem--and He entered it as Lord. What followed signifies that this temple would no longer be the place where God and man would meet. This temple would be replaced. Jesus will build a New Temple, which will be filled with God's Holy Spirit. Matthew records:

*Jesus entered the temple precincts and drove out all those engaged there in buying and selling. He overturned the money changers' tables and the stalls of the dove-sellers, saying to them:*

*"Scripture has it, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you are turning it into a den of thieves." Mt. 21:12-13*

Zechariah foretold that on the day the Lord come from the Mount of Olives to be made king over all the nations: *"...there shall no longer be any merchant in the house of the Lord of hosts (Zech. 14:21)."*

Within the temple, the Outer Court of the Gentiles was a veritable market place where people could purchase animals for sacrifice. The high priestly family of Annas controlled the concessions within the temple. As it was their servants who approved or rejected the animals offered for sacrifice, it was better to buy the offering that had the Annas seal of approval within the temple area, even though it could be purchased three to four times cheaper outside the temple. Only the Tyre coin, without a graven image, could be used in the temple. Money changers changed the Greek and Roman coins into Tyrian currency at a 4 percent charge. No doubt, when the tourists arrived from out of town, the unknowing ones were charged a bit more (it seldom pays to be ignorant). There is no doubt that there were thieves in the temple and some of them were high priests. Josephus speaks of Ananias II who sent his henchmen into the area of:

*...the thrashing-floors, and took away the tithes that belonged to the priests, by violence, and did not refrain from beating such as would not give these tithes to them. So the other high priests acted in like manner, so that some of the priests, that of old were want to be supported with these tithes, died for want of food.*

*Ant. 20:9.2*

Josephus said of the high priest, Ananias, "...*he was a great hoarder up of money.*" The House of Annas was not merely wealthy—apparently it was enormously wealthy. Ananias (also called *Annas*) became high priest around the time of Jesus' birth under the governorship of Quirinius. He served about twenty-three years and subsequently, at least four of his sons became high priests. At this time, his son-in-law Caiphas was high priest. Five sons of Caiphas later became high priests. The Lord said through the Prophet Jeremiah:

*Has this house which bears my name become in your eyes a den of thieves? I too see what is being done...I will do to this house named after me, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, just as I did to Shiloh. I will cast you away from me, as I cast away all your brethren.* Jer. 7:11,14-15

Jesus' demand that the animals of sacrifice be removed from the temple area symbolically signified that the end had come for such sacrifice. It was a prophetic gesture that came to fulfillment in 70 A.D., with the destruction of the temple.

The words uttered by Jesus in the temple echoed the voice of Isaiah:

*For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel: Others will I gather to him besides those already gathered.* Is. 56:7c-8

These words of Isaiah were symbolically being fulfilled that day in the temple. Matthew recorded: "*The blind and the lame came to him inside the temple area and he cured them (Mt. 21:14).*" We may miss the significance here of the blind and the lame coming to Him "*inside the temple area,*" if we do not realize that such people were kept out of the temple. This resulted from an interpretation of 2 Sam. 5:8: "*The blind and the lame shall not enter the palace,*" and from Leviticus which forbade "*he who is blind, or lame, or who has any disfigurement or malformation (21:18)*" to offer sacrifice. The writings of Qumran confirmed and approved this practice. Such things were considered to be punishments for unremitted sin and so afflicted people were considered "*unclean.*" The fact that Jesus encouraged them to enter the temple and come to Him signified His redemptive love. It recalls His words to the Pharisees:

*If you understood the meaning of the text, "It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned these innocent men.*

*Mt. 12:7*

About this time "*the chief priests and scribes*" arrive upon the scene like dark ominous clouds. This is their first appearance upon the gospel scene (though they have been mentioned) since Chapter Two, when they informed the murderous Herod where the Messiah would be born. Jesus' behavior in the temple area is an affront and a threat to their authority.

We need to bear in mind that, although these men were "religious" men in the sense that their lives were intimately involved and identified with the ministry of religion, they were neither pious nor holy men. They believed neither in after-life nor in Divine intervention in this life. They were astute businessmen who turned other men's piety into their financial profit, and they were clever politicians who were able, because of their great wealth, to manipulate the Roman authorities into maintaining their positions of power and wealth. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees,

Jesus faced prideful, spiritual people, but when He confronted the chief priests and their lawyers, He faced crass materialism and merciless greed. He came up against big business, old Jerusalem style, in the House of Annas, and He became a threat to its profit and power. Matthew relates:

*The chief priests and the scribes became indignant when they observed the wonders he worked, and how the children were shouting out in the temple precincts, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Do you hear what they are saying?" they asked him. Jesus said to them, "Of course I do! Did you never read this: 'From the speech of infants and children you have framed a hymn of praise?'"*

*Mt. 21:15-16*

Jesus quoted the first part of verse 3 from Psalm 8. He omitted its last phrase but it was understood: "*...because of your foes to silence the hostile and the vengeful.*" The Hebrew text of the psalm declares that the smallest children acknowledge the glory of the Creator, and those who do not do so are the adversaries of God. Jesus' words and example imply that He does not recognize the existing authority in Israel. He is the Messiah! He possesses a higher and greater authority which they reject.

Although Jerusalem is shaken and disturbed by His coming, it will not accept Him in faith. The underlying truth, although perhaps not consciously experienced by most, is that in rejecting Jesus there is an implied rejection of Yahweh. This resulted in Jerusalem's failure to repent as John the Baptist had urged. "With that," we are told, "he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night (Mt. 21:17)." "He left them" is an intimation of abandonment by God, which is soon to come, and leaves their house desolate. In Bethany, Jesus was the guest of His friend Lazarus, Martha, and Mary.

### THE STERILE TREE

At dawn, Jesus returned to Jerusalem and began to teach in the temple. On the way to the temple, Matthew relates that Jesus was hungry, and He went over to a fig tree in full foliage seeking some figs to eat. In actual fact, it was a good month too soon for the spring figs. When Jesus found no fruit upon the tree, he cursed it: "*Never again shall you produce fruit!*" and it withered up instantly (Mt. 21:18-19)." This beautiful sterile tree with no fruit reminded Jesus of Israel. Long ago the Lord spoke through the Prophet Jeremiah these words against Israel:

*How can you say, "We are wise, we have the law of the Lord?" Why, that has been changed into falsehood by the lying pen of the scribes! Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, of what avail is their wisdom? Small and great alike, all are greedy for gain, prophet and priest, all practice fraud. "Peace, peace!" they say, though there is no peace. Hence they shall be among those who fall; in their time of punishment they shall go down, says the Lord. I will gather them all in, says the Lord: no grapes on the vine, no figs on the fig trees, foliage withered! Why do we remain here? Let us form ranks and enter the walled cities, to perish there.*

*Jer. 8:8,10-14*

Jesus sees Israel in this tree. It has a vibrant appearance of true religion without the reality of religion. Its unfaithfulness to God's grace has resulted in its unfruitfulness. Jesus curses its sterility and prophesies its Divine rejection.

This incident would serve as a warning to the members of the New Israel. Within the Gospel there has been an emphasis upon trees that produce evil

fruit. Here it is not so much a matter of evil fruit as of no fruit. What Jesus truly curses is spiritual sterility. The People of God have constantly been nourished by grace through the Christian Community--the Church. However, many make no return--unwilling to deny selfish pursuits, so God cannot use them to spread His Kingdom on earth. They become like the fig tree--they possess the full foliage of religion but not the substance; they are spiritually sterile. Our Lord said to the Apostles:

*The seed on good ground are those who hear the word in a spirit of openness, retain it, and bear fruit through perseverance. Lk. 8:15*

*It was I who chose you to go forth and bear fruit. Your fruit must endure. Jn. 15:16*

*My Father has been glorified in your bearing much fruit and becoming my disciples. Jn. 15:8*

Matthew records the disciples' reaction to the fig tree:

*The disciples were dumbfounded when they saw this. They asked, "Why did the tree wither up so quickly?" Mt. 21:20-21*

Rather than explain the symbolism of the fig tree, Jesus uses their question to give a mini-lesson on how to be a fruitful tree. A disciple must daily live life with great trust and confidence in God and His presence within, and in a God who wills to work, not only within them, but through them. Jesus says:

*Believe me, if you trust and do not falter, not only will you do what I did to the fig tree, but if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' even that will happen. You will receive all that you pray for, provided you have faith. Mt. 21:21-22*

### THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

*After Jesus had entered the temple precincts, and while he was teaching, the chief priests and elders came up to him and said: "On what authority are you doing these things? Who has given you this power?" Mt. 21:23*

This amounted to an official inquiry into Jesus' right to exercise such authority within the temple. Every rabbi received his authority from the rabbi who instructed him and laid hands upon him. However, a prophet received authority directly from God. As religious leaders in Israel, it was the duty of these men to distinguish between the false and true prophets in Israel. Jesus responded to their question in rabbinical fashion with a counter question, which was a means to seek information that could not be directly asked. Often such a counter question resulted in a self-examination that produced surprising results. Jesus asked them whether John's baptism came from God or man. If they answered this question He would answer their question. Jesus cleverly had placed His opponents on the horns of a dilemma. Whichever way they went, He had them:

*They thought to themselves,, "If we say 'divine,' he will ask us, 'Then why did you not put faith in it?'; while if we say, 'merely human,' we shall have reason to fear the people, who all regard John as a prophet." So their answer to Jesus was, "We do not know." He said in turn, "Then neither will I tell you on what authority I do the things I do." Mt. 21:25-27*

Today we would say they took the 5th Amendment; we refuse to answer for fear of incriminating ourselves or we are more like certain politicians who refuse to publicly take a stand on a moral issue for fear of losing votes. The truth was that these men refused to admit any Divine intervention into the society that they ruled; they refused to recognize the Divine authority of the past prophets of Israel. Essentially, their reply implied they refused to accept the fact that John acted with Divine authority. However, publicly, they revealed themselves as inept leaders, who could not make a decision concerning the most electrifying religious figure to appear in centuries within Israel.

Although the general public had had no difficulty in discerning the evidence and making a decision, Jesus forced the chief priests and elders to admit publicly their incompetence, thereby releasing Him of any obligation to submit His case for their judgment. In truth, He demonstrated His superiority to their authority by refusing to answer their question. Jesus had forced them to publicly reveal their hypocrisy. The final showdown between Jesus and the Jewish authorities had been inaugurated.

Picking up on the theme of John's baptism, Jesus publicly expressed His belief in the baptism of John. He insisted that the chief priests and their lawyers had rejected the Will of God in this regard. He did this by putting a case before them. Jesus said to them:

*"What do you think of this case? There was man who had two sons. He approached the elder and said, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' The son replied, 'I am on my way, sir;' but he never went. Then the man came to his second son and said the same thing. This son said in reply, 'No, I will not;' but afterward he regretted it and went. Which of the two did what the father wanted?" They said, "The second." Jesus said to them, "Let me make it clear that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came preaching a way of holiness, you put no faith in him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did believe in him. Yet even when you saw that, you did not repent and believe in him."* *Mt. 21:28-32*

In the parable, Jesus makes a point that both Matthew and Luke emphasize in their gospel accounts--the necessity not only to hear the Word of God but to accomplish it. The first son remained verbally obedient to his father's will but inwardly there is no spirit of obedience. We may say he offers "passive resistance" to his father's will. The second son is defiant and openly refuses obedience. Later he repents and gives complete obedience to the father. The second son proves to be the true son of his father. There are echoes in this parable of the prodigal son. Obviously, it applies to the Jewish leaders, who prided themselves upon their observance of the Law, and despised those who failed to keep it.

Nevertheless, when God personally encountered both groups in the preaching of John the Baptist, the keepers of the Law rejected the way of righteousness he revealed to them, but, in the face of the same preaching, the public sinners did repent and came to righteousness. Their repentance was literally a miracle of grace before which the Jewish leaders remained unmoved and unrepentant. It is the old story of Israel rejecting the prophets sent by God. Jesus makes it clear that such repentance is no optional matter. The unrepentant are not entering the kingdom of God. This teaching confirms what Jesus preached earlier:



*None of those who cry out "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

*Mt. 7:21*

It is Jesus' judgment that the chief priests and the lawyers have failed to do this by their failure to believe in John and repent.

### THE VINEYARD AND THE BANQUET

Jesus addresses a parable to the chief priests and the elders that expresses the extent to which their unrepentant spirits would lead them. The parable readily leads itself to allegorical interpretations. Jesus speaks of a vineyard which a man planted and attended well. This vineyard he released under contract to certain tenant farmers. The hearers of the parable would immediately associate the vineyard with Israel as they were familiar with those words of Isaiah:

*My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside; he spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest vines; Within it he built a watchtower and hewed out a wine press....The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his cherished plant.*

*Is. 5:1-2,7*

Jesus goes on to say the owner went away to a foreign land, and yearly sent his servant to gather his share of the harvest. However, the tenants reject the servants of the owner--beating some and killing others. Finally, the owner sends his only son, believing they will respect the heir. However, the tenants recognized the son, and reasoned if he were dead the vineyard would be theirs. Their reason was not without some foundation. There existed a law stating that when a proselyte died without an heir or will the property owned went to the first man to seize it, which would be the tenant. Jesus relates: "*With that they seized him, dragged him outside the vineyard, and killed him (Mt. 21:39).*" Jesus now asked this question of the hearers:

*"What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants when he comes?" They give a logical reply: "He will bring that wicked crowd to a bad end and lease his vineyard out to others who will see to it that he has grapes at vintage time."*

*Mt. 21:41*

One translation reads, "*He will evilly destroy the evil men.*" The prophetic judgment of the chief priests and elders is placed within their own mouths. Rome came and did, indeed, "*evilly destroy the evil men,*" and the vineyard of the Lord was given over to the Gentiles.

This parable essentially expresses the unfaithfulness of Israel to its Covenant with Yahweh. This unfaithfulness reaches the ultimate crisis in the rejection of Jesus. As the Son of God, He truly could be said to be the culmination of all the prophets and just men who preceded Him. Just as the summation of parts equals the whole, the generation that caused the death of Jesus would be guilty of the blood shed from Abel to Zechariah.

The Gospel stresses that the rejected Jesus will become "*the keystone*" of a new structure:

*The stone which the builders rejected has become the keystone of the structure. It was the Lord who did this and we find it marvelous to behold.*  
Mt. 21:42

However, since Israel rejected Jesus "*the keystone*" of the new structure, Israel will be rejected by the builder, and the Gentiles will become the elect of God:

*For this reason, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will yield a rich harvest.*  
Mt. 21:43

The chief priests, the elders, and the Pharisees knew Jesus directed these parables against them. They ardently desired to arrest him but:

*...they had reason to fear the crowds who regarded him as a prophet.*  
Mt. 21:46

*And the crowds kept answering, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*  
Mt. 21:11

Following the thought of Israel's rejection and the Gentiles' election, Jesus relates the parable in which he describes this situation in terms of guests being invited by a king to a wedding banquet for his son. This parable repeats many of the same allegorical details found in the parable of the wicked tenants. The servants sent by the king to invite the guests to the

banquet, are again the prophets of Israel. Generally speaking, the people refuse the invitation. Some completely ignore it and go about their everyday business; others are offended by it and abuse and kill the servants.

Once again we see a reaction that symbolizes the Roman destruction of the Jews—“*At this the king grew furious and sent his army to destroy those murderers and burn their city (Mt. 22:7).*” Judgment is given upon the invited guests: “*They were unfit to come (Mt. 22:8).*” However, the king stresses the point that the banquet hall must be filled; the result is the call of the Gentiles: “*...Go out into the byroads and invite to the wedding anyone you come upon (Mt. 22:9).*”

At this point in the narration, the servants symbolize the disciples and apostles of Jesus. We are told they filled the banquet hall with “*...everyone they met, bad as well as good (Mt. 22:10).*” This certainly expresses the universal call to salvation: “*...for he wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth (I Tim. 2:4).*” However, once again it reveals that there will be weeds and wheat in the kingdom of God on earth.

When one reflects that the parable implies, in an allegorical fashion, that God invites people to the wedding banquet of His Son, it destroys the entire concept of the spirit of legalism in true religion. Mankind is invited to union and communion with God through the intermediary of His Divine Son. It establishes so clearly the intimate interpersonal union to which God calls each person. It gives the best reason and personal encouragement for personal holiness and purity of life. Salvation is not a matter of “saving one’s soul,” as much as loving the Person who has forever loved you with an everlasting Love. Truly, the call to salvation is the invitation to Life, and to live more abundantly from Life Eternal.

The parable concludes with an annex, in which a man is excluded from the banquet hall and cast out into the darkness because he is found to be “*not properly dressed.*” Certainly this is a symbol of the final judgment, when the weeds and the wheat are separated, and the weeds are removed from the Church. Was it repentance that the man lacked? Was it faith? Or was it love? Did he perhaps live a fruitless life within the Church? The story ends on a sober note for all to reflect upon: “*The invited are many, the elect are few (Mt. 22:14).*”

## THE TEST QUESTIONS

Now the time comes for the enemies of Jesus to begin their counter-attack. They attempt to discredit Jesus in public—“...*the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.*” Jesus is now subjected to a series of test questions from His enemies, with the hope that “*they might trap Jesus in speech (Mt. 22:15).*” The Pharisees, His first and oldest enemies, come first, having allied themselves with the Herodians, who presently are sympathetic to the Pharisees’ cause. The Herodians themselves supported the rule of the Herods, which implied support of Roman rule. These men seek to set Jesus up with their fawning and hypocritical flattering, which, in reality, states the truth despite their evil intentions:

*Teacher, we know you are a truthful man and teach God’s way sincerely. You court no one’s favor and do not act out of human respect. Give us your opinion, then, in this case. Is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor or not?*  
*Mt. 22:16-17*

Their unbelief is expressed in the title “*Teacher.*” However, Jesus is indeed Truth. Because He valiantly proclaims truth in a world loving darkness, He will be physically destroyed by the darkness. When they asked Jesus to “*Give us your opinion,*” they hoped to place Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If He says, “*pay the tax,*” He will alienate a great number of people who support the Zealots that advocate rebellion and death before paying tribute to Rome. If He says it is not lawful to pay the tax, He commits treason against the state. “*Jesus recognized their bad faith,*” cleverly sidesteps the trap, and turns it into an implied accusation against His interrogators. He asks them for a denarius, the coin with which the tax is paid; they give it to Him. The point has been publicly made that He does not possess such a coin, but they do. Those who carry and use Caesar’s coins must support Caesar and his system. Coins belong to the government of the king that issues them. So Jesus says:

*“Whose head is this, and whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. At that he said to them, “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s.”*  
*Mt. 22:20-21*

Once again Jesus makes His implied charge that these men have failed to give or render to God what is due to God--obedience to His Will. They are vitally concerned about a political issue of obedience to Caesar, yet they

neglect the one supreme and essential obedience—“...to hear my words and put them into practice (Lk. 6:47).” We are told: “Taken aback by this reply, they went off and left him (Mt. 22:22).”

The second test came from the Sadducees, who were the materialists in this religious society. The chief priests and elders belonged to this party. As we know, they did not believe in the afterlife, the existence of angels or spirits, or in Divine intervention into human affairs. They proposed a question to Jesus designed to make Him look foolish, and His teachings ridiculous. They began by quoting the Torah from Deuteronomy 25:5, which were the only Scriptures they accepted (they rejected everything else in the Old Testament): “If a man dies without children, his brother must take the wife and produce offspring for his brother (Mt. 22:24).” They went on to give the case of the woman who eventually had to marry seven brothers and then they asked: “At the resurrection, whose wife will she be, since all seven of them married her (Mt. 22:28)?” We may be sure that Jesus also “recognized their bad faith,” since they denied the resurrection of the dead. Their question certainly reflected some of the current theology on the resurrection that the rabbis floated around--it was a very materialistic concept.

Sadducees supported their disbelief in the resurrection, which implied a disbelief in survival after death, because it was not taught in the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. They argued that the Pentateuch implied that a man achieved immortality through his offspring, by his name enduring on earth. This is the reason that they insisted on the regulation in Deuteronomy that a brother must marry the widow of his brother if he left no offspring. If there were personal immortality after death, this would not be necessary.

Jesus replied to them: “You are badly misled because you fail to understand the Scriptures and the power of God (Mt. 22:29).” Jesus first proceeds to correct their concept of the resurrection. It is not a matter of rising to earthly life all over again. It is the going forward into a new and higher dimension of existence in which the physical sexual relationships of this world are transcended. The resurrected will “...live like angels in heaven (Mt. 22:30).” (Paul describes in I Cor:15, the spiritualization of the human body of the resurrected.) Next Jesus corrects their belief concerning the immortality of human beings. He meets them where they stand--in the Pentateuch. Jesus refers to Exodus 3:6:

*As to the fact that the dead are raised, have you not read what God said to you, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?" He is the God of the living, not of the dead.*

*Mt. 22:31-32*

Jesus made His reply very personal when He told His listeners: "*God said to you.*" Jesus teaches that God did not define His relationship with these men as something in the past, but a relationship of the present, one that continues today. Death does not destroy this relationship, which has been established, in time, between God and His saints. It continues after death because of the power of God, who is Love. Matthew writes: "*The crowds who listened were spellbound by his teaching (Mt. 22:33).*" However these very men, now silenced, will soon be the instrumental cause of Jesus' death and resurrection.

We are now told that all the enemies of Jesus "*assembled in a body,*" and came to Jesus with a question. One of their lawyers, we are told, "*....in an attempt to trip him up, asked him, 'Teacher, which commandment of the law is the greatest?'*" (Mt. 22:35-56)"

It is not certain what would have been the nature of this test--unless it was expected that Jesus would repudiate the Law in some fashion. His enemies implied that He did not keep the Law. However, Jesus' answer would have been impeccable to the Jewish ear. He began by quoting the beloved Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." This is the greatest and first commandment.*

*Mt. 22:37-38*

With this Jesus confirms His belief in the whole heart and essence of the Law and prophets. One must love God with one's entire personality, which includes one's feelings and emotions, but such love reaches down into the heart of every human being to capture the mind and the will. Perfect love of God expresses itself in the perfect obedience to the Will of God. However, Jesus goes on to say that the love of one's neighbor is like the Love of God:

*The second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

*Mt. 22:39*

It has been said that this statement puts love of God and love of neighbor, practically speaking, on the same plane. Jesus goes on to say—

*On these two commandments the whole law is based and the prophets as well.* *Mt. 22:40*

Jesus truly teaches here the way to resurrection and eternal life. It prepares the scene of the final judgment, when all will be judged in the light of only the commandment of Love:

*I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.* *Mt. 25:40*





## CHAPTER 21

### THE DIVINE PROPHET

#### INTRODUCTION

The enemies of Jesus in Jerusalem consolidated their strength to oppose Jesus' claim to being the Messiah of Israel. They confronted Him separately and united, publicly seeking to discredit Him in the eyes of the people. However, Jesus proved to be wiser than a serpent. He stood like an immovable rock before the wave of their deadly questioning. His wise and clever answers dissipated their hopes of entrapping Him in His speech. All their efforts only succeeded in self-humiliation. Jesus ended the test questions by putting His opponents to the test. All the Pharisees accepted, as fact, that David wrote Psalm 110 under Divine inspiration. With this in mind, we are told that:

*In turn Jesus put a question to the assembled Pharisees, "What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "David's," they answered. He said to them, "Then how is it that David under the Spirit's influence calls him 'lord,' as he does: 'The Lord said to my lord, Sit at my right hand, until I humble your enemies beneath your feet?' If David calls him 'lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could give him an answer.*

*Mt. 22:41-46c*

Jesus had proposed quite an intriguing question. It certainly stimulates the imagination as to "*Whose son is he?*" Jesus does not give an answer.

During His ministry, Jesus demonstrated a reluctance to apply to Himself titles such as *Christ* or *Son of David*. These titles carried powerful political implications. Every Jewish leader who rebelled against Rome in those days, claimed to be the Messiah. Many Jewish *messiahs* had come, and others would come. Jesus sought to correct prevalent false concepts about the Messiah and His messianic reign through His teachings--especially in His lessons through the parables. Matthew has stressed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, but he has intimated that He is much more than the Son of David. He is, in a unique way, Emmanuel (God-with-us). However, when Jesus asked the Pharisees who they thought He was, He probably did not seek any such answer. He received exactly the answer He desired--they did not know. They

were unable to answer the question. They demonstrated their inability to explain an essential reference to the Messiah in the Scriptures that dealt with the identity of the Messiah. The conclusion from such ignorance is obvious--they were not qualified to make any judgment concerning Jesus' claim to being the Messiah. In justice, they should have suspended judgment in His case. Their incompetence has been demonstrated. They are not qualified to judge Jesus.

This ended the interrogation of Jesus: "*No one dared, from that day on, to ask him any questions (Mt. 22:46).*" Apparently, in this case, the examiners failed their own tests.

### JESUS THE PROPHET

In the discourses now to follow, Matthew presents Jesus in the role of prophet. He appears as the final and greatest prophet sent by God to Israel. Jesus implied His prophetic mission when He said: "*You have a greater than Jonah here (Mt. 12:41).*" He implied His kingship when He said: "*You have a greater than Solomon here (Mt. 12:42).*" The author of Hebrews pointed out that Jesus, in His death, became the "*great high priest*" of the New Covenant—"a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Hb. 7:21)."

We are told that Jesus now addresses both the crowds and His disciples. This implies that what will follow applies not only to the Old, but also to the New Israel. What Jesus condemns in the Old Israel, He would likewise condemn in the Christian Community. Jesus criticizes that religious perversion in the Pharisaic community that can occur in any religious society, when the nature of man fails to be docile to the grace of God, and follows its own prideful and darkened inclinations.

Jesus makes very clear that He does not criticize authority in Israel, but rather, the misuse of authority and the lives of those in authority. He makes a distinction between the position of authority and the man who holds the position, and how he exercises his authority. In recent history, the American people became extremely critical of a particular President. Many were greatly relieved when this man resigned from the position of President of the United States. The criticisms were not directed towards the office of presidency, but to the man, the President, who exercised the authority. Matthew records:

*Then Jesus told the crowds and his disciples: "The scribes and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers; therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you." Mt.23:1-3*

Here Jesus expresses His own respect for the Mosaic Law. He recognized that Moses acted with God-given authority--to obey Moses was to obey God. Nevertheless, this does not imply that Jesus did not possess the authority to change the Mosaic legislation. Moses foretold the coming of a prophet like himself who would possess the same divine power to legislate for the People of God. The Lord confirmed Moses' words:

*I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him. If any man will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I will make him answer for it.*

The Mosaic Law remained in full force until the coming of the Messiah. The teachings of Jesus reconfirmed and sanctified the whole heart and essence of the Mosaic Law, when He declared that the proper love of God and neighbor fulfilled the entire law and the prophets (See Mt. 22:40). Jesus did not lay aside the Mosaic Law but distilled its essence—"Agape-love". This He made the foundation Law of the New Covenant. The Mosaic Law, with its authority, remained in force until the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul wrote to the Romans that he proclaimed the Gospel:

*...concerning God's Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh but was made Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.*  
*Rm. 1:3-4*

In teaching respect for the Mosaic Law, Jesus teaches His disciples that they should respect God-given authority, even when those in authority are a disappointment to the Community.

Our Greek text speaks of the *cathedras*--translated *chair* or *seat*--of Moses. The *cathedras* referred to the seat in the synagogue facing the people. It was from this seat that the authentic teachings on the Scriptures were delivered to the congregation. Jesus teaches that since the scribes and the Pharisees are the official teachers in Israel--since they sit upon the seat of Moses--they ought to be obeyed. However, He goes on, in His prophetic role, to criticize the

administration of this office, and the private lives of those in authority. Few would be in a position to make such valid criticism. If criticism of authority is unfounded and unjust, it is calumnious. In order to justly criticize the administration of authority, and the personal lives of those in authority, one must possess both a good understanding of the law in order to determine its misinterpretations, and to know the personal motivations of the authorities. Speaking about civil disobedience Gandhi once wrote:

*Before one can be fit for the practice of civil disobedience one must have rendered a willing and respectful obedience to the state laws—It is only when a person has thus obeyed the laws of society scrupulously that he is in a position to judge as to which particular rules are good and just and which are unjust and iniquitous. Only then does the right accrue to him of the civil disobedience of certain laws in well-defined circumstances. Autobiography--Ch. XXXIII*

As we see in our texts, Jesus attacks not only the exercise of authority but also the personal lives of those in authority. This is prophetic judgment--Divinely inspired. In a word, Jesus tells the people:

*Therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you. But do not follow their example. Their words are bold but their deeds are few. They bind up heavy loads, hard to carry, to lie on other men's shoulders, while they themselves will not lift a finger to budge them.*

*Mt. 23:3-4*

This is the heart of Jesus' criticism against the Pharisees' administration of the Mosaic Law; they have rendered it merciless. In the meantime, they have made their own religious lives into an ostentatious show of piety that is devoid of any true religious piety. They have made the esteem of others the motivation for their "pious" religious lives. Jesus says:

*All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and wear huge tassels. They are fond of places of honor at banquets and the front seats in synagogues, of marks of respect in public and of being called "Rabbi".*

*Mt. 23:5-7*

Jesus accused the Pharisees of making an external display of religion while inwardly lacking the true spirit of religion. He uses two common practices among pious Jews to illustrate His point: "They widen their phylacteries and

*wear huge tassels.*" We have already seen that Jesus himself wore the tassels as prescribed by the Law:

*The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and tell them that they and their descendants must put tassels on the corners of their garments, fastening each corner tassel with a violet cord. When you use these tassels, let the sight of them remind you to keep all the commandments of, the Lord, without going wantonly astray after the desires of your hearts and eyes."* Num. 15:37-39

Jesus implied the Pharisees enlarged their tassels so that the sight of them would remind other people how well they (the Pharisees) kept the commandments. We may also presume that Jesus wore a phylactery while at prayer. The phylacteries were small containers for sheepskin parchments, upon which were written the text of Exodus 13:1-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. These were fastened to the left wrist and to the forehead in times of prayer. The phylactery upon the forehead was so hung as to fall in front of the eyes. This custom developed from a literal interpretation of:

*Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today....Bind them at your wrists as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead.* Det. 6:7-8

Jesus implied the Pharisees enlarged their phylacteries as a sign to everyone else that the Law was always before their eyes. However Jesus intimated that what was before their eyes was not within their hearts.

We need to look a bit closer at Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees' administration of authority, in order to keep His condemnation in proper perspective, and to realize well the lesson these condemnations have for the Christian Community. Even though Jesus calls them hypocrites, this accusation is directed more at what they have done to the Law of God than to what they have personally become. In the Pharisees we see the product of a loveless spirit, condemned by Jesus, that scrupulously interprets the Law of God. It is religion without love, which obeys God for selfish motives or out of fear of punishment. Such religion easily deteriorates into merciless legalism.

When religious law becomes an end in itself--an object of unconscious adoration and worship--such a religion can easily demand human sacrifice of

one kind or another. In the Christian Church, which represents Jesus Christ in the world, we must never forget that His invitation to people reads:

*Come to me, all of you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.* *Mt. 11:28-30*

One cannot love laws that appear only as limitations and deprivations of freedom--as tests and trials for the soul to prove worth. When such laws express the very heart of the lawgiver, then it follows that one cannot truly love the lawgiver if one cannot love the law. However, one may suppress the conscious awareness of one's feelings, which certainly leads to a depressed and joyless service. When the Love of God remains invisible within the Divine Law, the law does not stimulate love of the law or love of God. Religion becomes joyless. The subjects openly rebel and cast off the law, becoming objective sinners living lawless lives; or they remain within the law and live lives of passive resistance or reluctant obedience. Such people may seek, by whatever means possible, to get around the law, while still maintaining some legal observance of it. Some time ago a rather spiritual lady said of such moral theologians within the Church, "*They enter heaven with scorched behinds.*"

However, there are others who suppress their hatred of the law and the Lawgiver, and consciously adore the law--making it their God, believing they will win the benediction of God because of their minute and scrupulous observance of the law. They find their own worth and peace in the fulfillment of the Law, and can become very religiously proud and quite fanatical and zealous for its promulgation and observance. They succeed in internalizing the external law, without internalizing its proper spirit. They become, in a sense, an incarnation of legalism, and often grow as hard and cold as law without spirit becomes.

Also, there are subjects and servants of the law who love, not law, but authority and power. They worship authority and seek to possess it. In possession of it, they experience themselves as powerful. Such people, within themselves, possess no sense of personal power; subconsciously they experience themselves as weak and impotent. Consciously, they despise such people. To gain authority is a matter of personal survival for them. Once they possess it, they must make others feel their authority in order for them to benefit by it; they demand perfect obedience to the laws their authority

commands. The justice or injustice of the command is of little importance to them. They can indeed become merciless, and understandably so, as they truly despise those under them as being weak and impotent.

When one looks at the Old Testament, one sees ten basic Divine Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and over six hundred laws implementing and clarifying the Ten Commandments. Needless to say, it would not be surprising if one lost sight of the ten, and the spirit behind them, in the midst of this forest of legislation. One could get so involved in the implementation and clarification that one could lose the primary purpose of it all--love of God and neighbor.

What we find in the Old Testament are Ten Commandments which state general principles of religious conduct that must be applied to human conduct, and to interpersonal relationships within daily religious life. From the necessity that law creates, the art of casuistry develops alongside of law. Casuistry is the art of applying general principles of conduct and morality to particular cases. This is all necessary legalism, which necessitates judges and lawyers. The more legalistic a society, the more the judges and lawyers are needed. Casuistry judges human acts in their relationship to the established law. It discovers and classifies exceptions to the law. It judges how far a particular human act can go and still remain within the rules laid down by the Scriptures, the Church, or a society.

For an example, the Scriptures forbade one to kill. Does that mean a bug as well as a man? Some from India would say "yes," but Judean-Christian moralists say "no." The commandment, they insist, applies only to the unjust taking another's life. Is capital punishment murder? "No!" it answers, "*because it is not an unjust act.*" Then there is the case of abortion--is it murder? Christian Casuistry says "Yes!"--it is the unjust taking another's life. Pagan Casuistry says "No!"--it is neither a matter of injustice nor personal life. As we can see, the art of casuistry can be practiced for good or for evil.

The Pharisees appear to be guilty of casuistry on the other side of the coin; they perverted the art of casuistry to scrupulosity; they made a fetish of legal observances. According to Jesus, it was for the purpose of their being seen and esteemed by men. Their conduct ended by subjecting the law of God to ridicule and contempt, and made it so burdensome upon people that they came not only to despise the law, but the Lawgiver. While the scrupulous observance of the law, which the Pharisees made the norm of religious

observance, fed their pride and ego esteem, it reduced others to spiritual pride or hypocrisy on the one hand, and to despair and rebellion on the other. Their spirit truly angered Jesus, because their scrupulous observance of the law really perverted the loving design of God, and consequently robbed God of the honor and glory due Him.

Jesus tried to put law back into its proper perspective when He reduced the six hundred thirty-one laws to two:

*“You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well.*

*Mt. 22:37-40*

In a practical sense Jesus reduced the two to one--Agape-love. Truly, the mature religious person loves the law of God. He finds delight and nourishment in the law of God. Its fulfillment becomes a joy. It becomes the concrete expression of love of God, and the union of one's heart with God, that cannot but result in Peace and Joy. A wise man once said that a service rendered to another:

*When it is done for show or for fear of public opinion, it stunts the person and crushes the spirit. Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served; but all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy.*

*Gandhi--Autobiography--Ch. XXVI*

Reflecting upon the social projection of the religion of the Pharisees, Jesus re-emphasized His own doctrine of greatness in the kingdom of God to His disciples:

*The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, but whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

*Mt. 23:11-12*

Jesus discourages a title of honor being used in the Christian Community that appears to exalt certain members within the community above others. Pharisees did not greet people in the streets but were greeted. They loved such



titles as *Master, Father, and Teacher*. Their disciples never walked beside them but behind them. Jesus said to His disciples:

*As to you, avoid the title "Rabbi." One among you is your teacher, the rest are learners. Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven. Avoid being called teachers. Only one is your teacher, the Messiah.* *Mt. 23:8-9*

These three titles in Aramaic, *Rabbi, Abba, Moreh*, were all honored titles that attributed personal greatness to the bearers. In the mind of Jesus, titles attributed to man what belonged to God and to the Messiah. Some think the Church should re-think its own use of titles. The use of *Father* is often called into question--for some reason there does not seem to be the same problem with *teacher*. Others have pointed out that it was not the use of the words themselves that Jesus objected to, but what the use of the words implied in His day. These titles, seen in a concept of roles of service to the Community, would not be objectionable to the Lord. Paul did not hesitate to say to the Corinthians:

*Granted you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you have only one father. It was I who begot you in Christ Jesus through my preaching of the gospel.* *I Cor. 4:15*

### THE SEVEN WOES

Matthew records one of the severest passages within the New Testament. It probably is a compilation of Jesus' criticisms and warnings to His disciples about the "*yeast of the Pharisees*." Many feel this section also reflects much of the early Christian Church's attitude towards the Pharisees, who instigated persecutions against the early Christians. This presentation consists primarily of seven woes, which some see to be the negative counterpart of the Beatitudes given in the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus warned His disciples to be aware of the "*yeast of the Pharisees*," He intimated this spirit could corrupt the disciples as well. It is suggested that this section would better serve as a warning to the Christian Church if these "*woes*" were not looked upon so much as moral judgments upon the Pharisees, as judgments of condemnation upon a religious system that the Pharisees symbolized. It was a tragic religious situation, in which people, spiritually blinded, looked upon themselves as being truly religious and godly

people, but in fact they are revealed to be God's enemies. Such a religious system truly brought the law of God into contempt. Their condemnation serves as a warning that any religious system that perverts the true spirit of religion, deserves to be numbered among the ungodly.

The word translated *woe* is *ouai*. It is an expression that conveys grief as well as a warning. Perhaps here it would best be seen as a lament. The heart of Jesus grieves and laments over the effects and fate of such a religious system. In the first "*woe*," Jesus accuses the teaching authorities of hindering instead of directing people into the kingdom of God. Their teachings and examples have closed the door to many. They refuse to enter, and they impede others. This *woe* may reflect the experience of the early church when the Pharisees threaten to excommunicate any Jew from the synagogue who professes Jesus to be the Messiah. In a word, we can say that the leaders of the people, through their words and deeds, became a scandal--a stumbling block to salvation.

In the second "*woe*," Jesus speaks of the great zeal of the Pharisees to make converts. They traverse the seas to make a single convert. In the first century, the Pharisees did inaugurate an active campaign to convert the Gentiles. Jesus speaks of their converts becoming devils twice as wicked as the Pharisees. Perhaps this is a reference to the ardent zeal of first conversion. Most probably these converts of Judaism became the most active opponents to the Christian religion. We read in Acts that Paul and Barnabas were expelled from Antioch in Pisidia because:

*...the Jews stirred up their influential women sympathizers and the leading men of town and in that way got a persecution started against Paul and Barnabas.*  
*Acts 13:50*

The implication of Jesus' words being that their conversion to Judaism made it twice as hard for them to come to salvation, and now are doubly subjected to condemnation.

Within the next "*woe*," Jesus enumerates an example of their spiritual blindness. He refers to their teaching on the obligation of oaths--an oath being the calling upon someone or something higher to witness the truth of a statement. The illustration used by Jesus implies that the Pharisees determined the validity of the oath by the words used. With such knowledge one could pretend to take an oath that would not be religiously binding. Jesus'

words imply that if a man intends to take an oath, he takes one--regardless of the words used. If he pretends to take an oath, and another believes he has, he has in reality taken an oath.

The fourth "*woe*" deals with the Pharisees' scrupulous attention to paying tithes. Customarily, tithes were paid upon grain, wine, and oil, but the Pharisees insisted on even paying tithes on small plants and seeds—"mint, dill and cumin." Jesus insisted that while they gave scrupulous attention to these little things they neglected "*the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and good faith. It is these you should have practiced without neglecting the others (Mt. 23:23).*" There was a custom among the Jews, of placing a strainer over a pitcher when pouring from it, so all foreign matter would be strained out. Flying insects were considered impure creatures. This custom stimulated Jesus to compare their religious behavior to a person who strains out a gnat and "*swallows the camel (Mt. 23:24).*" The camel was the largest animal in Palestine.

In the fifth and sixth woes, Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy. He compares them to bowls, clean on the outside but dirty on the inside. They gave the external appearance of being religious people, but they were alienated from God in their hearts. Another Jewish custom stimulated another comparison. At Passover time it was customary to whitewash all tombs. Any one who came in contact with a tomb, even accidentally, became ritually impure and could not celebrate the Passover. In these whitewashed tombs, Jesus saw a perfect reflection of the Pharisees' hypocrisy:

*You are like whitewashed tombs, beautiful to look at on the outside but inside full of filth and dead men's bones. Thus you present to view a holy exterior while hypocrisy and evil fill you within.*

*Mt. 23:27-28*

Speaking of tombs leads Jesus to the seventh and final "*woe,*" which is the culmination of all their evils. Jesus observed that the Pharisees piously build and decorate the tombs of martyred prophets, as much as to say, "*we would not have been like our ancestors and murdered the prophets.*" It has been pointed out that silent and dead prophets have always been much easier to venerate. Jesus' words imply that their actions signify they are sons of those who murdered the prophets and, as sons, they share the characteristics of their fathers. Apples do not fall too far from the tree. Jesus insinuates that these physical heirs will become true spiritual heirs of their fathers. He said to

them: *“Now it is your turn: fill up the vessel measured out by your forefathers (Mt. 23:32).”* They will follow in the footsteps of their fathers, and will kill the prophets. Their murderous acts will not end with Jesus, but will be extended to His apostles and disciples. Once again, Jesus compares them to a brood of vipers and confirms the judgment of John the Baptist upon them:

*When he saw that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were stepping forward for this bath, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? Give some evidence that you mean to reform.”* Mt. 3:7-8

Jesus implies wrath will overtake them. Deadly vipers must be destroyed. Jesus asked them: *“How can you escape condemnation to Gehenna (Mt. 23:33)?”* However, the mercy of God is still extended to them. They will be given a chance to escape eternal punishment—*“For this reason I shall send you prophets and wise men and scribes (Mt. 23:34).”* Despite this the Pharisees will culminate and complete their apostasy, when in the light of Jesus' resurrection, they will seek to destroy the witnesses of the resurrection:

*Some you will kill and crucify, others you will flog in your synagogues and hunt down from city to city; until retribution overtakes you for all the blood of the just ones shed on earth, from the blood of holy Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple building and the altar. All this, I assure you, will be the fate of the present generation.*

*Mt. 23:34-36*

It has been suggested that this collective guilt and the promised retribution, is to be understood in the light of the terrible destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, at which time thousands of Jews perished at the hands of the Romans and fellow Jews. To the minds of those trained in the Old Testament Scriptures, such tragic punishment permitted by God testified that this generation bore the burden of a great guilt.

The personal sorrow of Jesus over His people's rejection of their salvation and God's plan for them culminates in His lament over Jerusalem. Jerusalem symbolized Israel.

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, murderess of prophets and stoner of those who were sent to you! How often have I yearned to gather your*

*children as a mother bird gathers her young under her wings, but  
you refused me!* *Mt. 23:37*

All those prophets sent to Israel represented the merciful Love of God extended towards sinful people--Yahweh calling them to repentance. All those prophets, murdered and stoned, represented Israel's rejection of the call to repentance and salvation. The Father's ultimate plan comes in sending His only begotten Son as the Messiah. His rejection, which included the rejection of those personal witnesses to His Resurrection, finalized the rejection and solidified their impenitence. The words of Jesus signified that, even despite all these crimes and a history of divine rejection, God was open to forgive them and to receive them once more into His protective and providential care--expressed so picturesquely and tenderly as a mother hen gathering her little chickens under her wing. The Prophet Jesus reveals the terrible consequence of such impenitence. When the human will has become irrevocably hardened against the Will of God, Israel will experience the Wrath of God. Jesus proclaims, "*Recall the saying, 'You will find your temple deserted (Mt.23:38.)'*"

A study of Romans reveals that the Wrath of God is not Divine Vengeance wreaked upon sinful people in the form of lightening bolts hurled by God from heaven. It is something even more deadly--it is Divine Abandonment. God withdraws from the human situation and permits it, without Divine Grace, to chart its own course, and achieve its own end; the end result is that life on earth, or life in eternity, becomes Hell. For Hell is where God is willed out. Hell is what rebellious creatures make of the gift of life when the Giver of Life has been expelled. God neither creates Hell nor sends anyone there:

*...for he wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth.*

*1 Tim. 2:4*

*For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, says the  
Lord God. Return and live!*

*Ez. 18:32*

Apparently, Matthew does not follow Paul's belief that there will be another chance for Israel, and that the Jews will be converted. The words recorded by Matthew imply the Jews will only acknowledge Jesus on that day when all creation must proclaim Him. When:

*every knee must bend...and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God  
the Father: JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!*

*Phil. 2:10-11*

In other words, when Jesus comes in glory for the final judgment:

*I tell you, you will not see me from this time on until you declare,  
"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"* Mt. 23:39

"*You will not see me,*" implies you will not know nor recognize Jesus as Lord until He comes in glory and judgment.

At this point Matthew records: "*Jesus left the temple precincts then (Mt. 24:1).*" His leaving the temple begins the fulfillment of the prophecy—"You will find your temple deserted (Mt. 23:38)." This will be dramatically symbolized when at the moment of Jesus' death—"Suddenly the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom (Mt. 27:51)."

### THE LITTLE APOCALYPSE

As Jesus leaves the temple area, His disciples comment upon the beautiful temple complex. Jesus responds to their observations with the prophecy of its coming destruction, "*Do you see all these buildings? I assure you, not one stone will be left on another--it will all be torn down (Mt. 24:2).*"

Leaving the temple area, Jesus and His disciples departed through the East Gate, descended into the Kedron Valley, and ascended up the slopes of the Mount of Olives. There Jesus seated Himself and His disciples gathered around Him, with His terrible prediction still ringing in their ears. They privately asked Jesus two questions: *Tell us when will all this occur? What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the world (Mt. 24:3)?*

They desired to know when the temple would be destroyed, and what would be the signs of the Second coming of Jesus and the end of the world. It is highly possible within their minds that they believed one would follow upon the other. As we seek to understand Jesus' reply, we must bear in mind that "*the end of the world*" did not necessarily imply the end of life on our planet. Apocalyptic prophets and teachers often used the destruction of celestial bodies as symbols to signify the end of a social kingdom--the collapse of a great kingdom.

Jesus first addressed Himself to the last question concerning the Second Coming. The answer given seems to imply that Matthew did not expect a speedy return of the Lord. Jesus teaches that the world will continue on its

evil, natural course. Men will be filled with hatred and wars, one upon another. Nature will continue to express its rebellion against rebellious mankind: *"There will be famine and pestilence and earthquakes in many places (Mt. 24:7)."* Such things are not to be considered the signs of the Second Coming; no more than the first pangs of birth mean the baby is about to be born. Jesus prophesied that during the confusing and distressful times, men will look for *"saviors"* and *"messiahs"* and that there will be no lack of men coming forward to fulfill the expected roles. The blind will lead the blind. *"False prophets will rise in great numbers to mislead many (Mt. 24:11)."*

The Church in the world will be persecuted: *"They will hand you over to torture and kill you. Indeed, you will be hated by all nations on my account (Mt. 24:9-10)."* The true disciples will be the modern prophets. In these times of persecution, many will apostatize from the true faith, and an environment of betrayal and hate will be fostered. Many Christians will not rise above such an environment and will surrender to hatred, and abandon faith and love as a way of life: *"Because of the increase of evil, the love of most will grow cold (Mt. 24:12)."* However, in the midst of all this evil, the Church will proceed on its course--as a ship in a mighty storm. The waves of evil will not destroy it: *"This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world as a witness to all the nations (Mt. 24:14)."*

Jesus revealed that then, and only then, will the curtain fall on the act called *"mankind."* *"Only after that will the end come (Mt. 24:14)."* The end does not bring life to an end but brings each life to personal judgment. Jesus confirms who, in the end, will be saved: *"The man who holds out to the end, however, is he one who will see salvation (Mt. 24:13)."* This implies that the disciple who remains firmly committed to Jesus Christ and His Way, despite all persecutions, will be saved.

As we read this discourse given upon the Mount of Olives, it seems that verse fourteen, which ended with *"Only after that will the end come,"* flows quite naturally into verse thirty-six which reads *"....as for the exact day or hour, no one knows it neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father only (Mt. 24:36)."*

However, between the logical flow of these verses is inserted a veritable kaleidoscope of apocalyptic symbols and expressions. This section has rightly been called one of the most difficult passages within the New Testament. Scholars generally agree that this section is a composite of sayings and

materials gathered from various sources. They have been grouped together to form an apocalyptic picture. No less than three themes appear between verses twenty-nine and thirty-one. Terminology is borrowed from Isaiah's descriptions of the fall of Babylon and Edom, from Ezekiel's description of the distress to fall upon Egypt, and from Joel's description of the last days.

As can be seen in the Apocalypse, such writing, called *apocalyptic*, is a unique literary form with its own peculiar use of language. It has been best compared to the dream world of the unconscious where truth is spoken to us in strange symbols, and usually speaking, the message of dreams is a present one, not a future one. Apocalyptic literature borrows heavily from Old Testament imagery.

The general purpose of apocalyptic literature is comfort for the People of God in times of stress. It presents salvation history in its own unique form of symbolism, and often presents the present in the form of past or future prophecies. The strong imagery of the apocalyptic literature is intended to express God's power and control of the world. It is not intended to terrorize the faithful, but the faithless and the godless. As recorded in Luke, "*When these things begin to happen, stand erect and hold your heads high, for your deliverance is near at hand (Lk. 21:28).*"

It has been wisely pointed out how futile it is to seek to arrange this material in some logical order, and make it fit subsequent events in world history. Of course, one can attempt to do this--and many do so; however, the conclusions are erroneous deductions. First of all, the material is a compilation of materials delivered at different times and under different circumstances. Second, it is most probably an apocalyptic insert that is not intended to be prophecy. The very nature of the material--like the daily reading of the horoscope may be applied to many historical situations and human needs. One biblical scholar observed:

*The highly technical nature of the discussion of this material among New Testament scholars, and the very considerable body of literature accumulated around it, has ruled out any detailed treatment.*

*W. F. Albright*



However, scholars generally agree that verses four through thirty-six are a free commentary by Matthew on several sections of the Book of Daniel: 7:8-27; 8:9-26; 9:24-27; 11:21; 12:13. Nevertheless, the passage does answer the first question asked by the apostles, "Tell us, when will this occur?" Jesus responds:

*When you see the abominable and destructive thing which the prophet Daniel foretold standing on holy ground (let the reader take note!), those in Judea must flee to the mountains. Mt. 24:15-16*

Jesus' words generally seem to imply that the invasion of the Holy Land by the Roman Army would signal the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. Most particularly, it would refer to the Roman legions entering the temple with their Roman insignia. At that moment however, flight would have been impossible. According to Eusebius--the Christians in Jerusalem and Palestine did interpret this properly, and fled to Pella before 70 A.D. Jesus' words go on to say that in the time before the destruction of the temple...

*...false prophets will appear performing signs and wonders as great as to mislead even the chosen if that were possible. Mt. 24:24*

This may have been a warning for Christians not to place their confidence in either the Romans or the Jewish Zealots. There may have been a strong spirit of nationalism tempting Christians to cast their lot with the rebellious forces.

It has been pointed out that one expression used in this section has been the source of much misinterpretation--the phrase "*The Son of Man coming.*" This phrase is often interpreted to apply to the Second Coming of Jesus. However, it has been observed that the expression comes from Daniel; from its references within Daniel, we are directed towards its proper interpretation. Daniel speaks of "*one like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven,*" to the Ancient One from whom he received "*dominion, glory, and kingship (See Dn. 7:13-14).*" In Luke, Jesus said, "*A time will come when you will long to see one day of the Son of Man but will not see it (Lk. 17:22).*" In the light of Daniel, the expression, "*the Son of Man Coming,*" does not refer to the Second Coming, but rather to Christ's passing victoriously through suffering to come to the Father, from whom He receives "*dominion, glory and kingship.*" The sign in the sky of the Son of Man's coming to the Father is the Cross. When the disciples see this sign they will know that the hour has arrived--"*the Son of Man coming*" to the Father. His hour of glory has arrived. When they see

the Cross in the sky they can lift up their heads and know that the hour of their deliverance has arrived.

Again it has been observed that the title "*son of man*" in Daniel, is a collective title that refers to Israel. Since it has been identified with Christ--it is likewise identifiable with the disciples of Christ. Within this context, the Second Coming of Christ may be seen as "*the coming to the Father of redeemed mankind, which is the realization of the kingdom of God.*" Of course, this does not deny the historical coming of Jesus at the end of the world. It corrects certain misinterpretations of the phrase, and it enlarges the concept of the Second Coming.

In light of the above, the second question asked by the disciples does not appear as clear as it did on first sight: "*What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the world (Mt. 24:3)?*" To which "*coming*" is the question addressed? Also, Jesus' reply in verse thirty-six is no longer as clear in its reference:

*As for the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father only. The coming of the Son of Man will repeat what happened in Noah's time. Mt. 24:36-37*

When spoken, was this a reference to the mysterious moment of His death and His entrance into glory, or to the moment when He returns as Lord and Judge of the universe? From what follows, it seems as if Matthew applies it to Jesus' coming as Judge. He goes on to say that judgment overtook people in the days of Noah. There were no extraordinary manifestations that occurred before as a warning. Even the judgment arrived in a normal and ordinary manner--it began to rain. The extraordinary thing about it was that it didn't stop raining. Jesus' words imply that it will be something like that when He comes:

*They were totally unconcerned until the flood came and destroyed them. So will it be at the coming of the Son of Man. Mt. 24:39*

Jesus goes on to say: "*Stay awake, therefore! You cannot know the day your Lord is coming (Mt. 24:42).*"

## THE FORESIGHTED SERVANT

The disciples are encouraged to be "*faithful, farsighted servants*," as they await the coming of the Lord. They are to keep before their eyes the overall picture of their lives. While they deal with the circumstances of each day, they must keep in mind their final end when they must give an account to the Lord for their stewardship--for the gift of life given into their possession. Keeping their final end in view will keep all the everyday events of life in their proper perspective.

Since the leadership of the Church was looked upon as being stewards, or overseers, over the household of the Lord, this text may have special reference to the Apostles and their successors. It refers to servants "*...whom the master has put in charge of his household to dispense food at need (Mt. 24:45).*" Jesus says:

*Happy that servant whom his master discovers at work on his return!  
I assure you; he will put him in charge of all his property. Mt. 24:46*

Apparently, a "*farsighted servant*" does not look forward to retirement but to always being a "*faithful*" servant.

The disciples have been well instructed by Jesus that they are to view their ministry as offices of service. It is not a position in which to "*lord*" it over others, but to serve others as Jesus did, setting the example by His life. As there will always be wheat among the weeds in the Church, there will also be good and bad shepherds within the Church. Jesus gives an example of one such bad servant who says to himself:

*"My master is a long time in coming," and begins to beat his fellow servants, to eat and drink with drunkards, that man's master will return when he is not ready and least expects him. He will punish him severely and settle with him as is done with hypocrites. There will be wailing then and grinding of teeth. Mt. 24:48-51*

This certainly would apply to those within the Christian Community who exercise their ministries for their own personal gratification. Jesus said it would be settled with them as with the hypocrites. To the hypocrites he said: "*How can you escape condemnation to Gehenna (Mt. 23:33)?*"

Jesus relates a parable in which he compares the reign of God to ten virgins: *"...ten bridesmaids who took their torches (lamps) and went out to welcome the groom (Mt. 25:1)."* However, the arrival of the groom has been delayed, and the awaiting virgins fall asleep. Suddenly the alarm sounds announcing that the groom has arrived, and to come and greet him. It is midnight as the virgins prepared their lamps to go out and meet the groom—five discovered they had insufficient oil. The other five virgins prudently decided not to share their oil. The imprudent virgins were forced to go quickly and purchase oil for their lamps. On returning, they discovered the bride and her bridesmaids had departed to the home of the groom. Upon arriving at the home of the groom they discovered the doors barred. *"Master, master!" they cried. "Open the door for us." But he answered, "I tell you, I do not know you." (Mt. 25:11-12.)*

This parable has come to be treated as an allegory; it calls to mind the invitation to the wedding feast of the king's son. These ten virgins represent the Church, or the Christian Community, which is the Bride of Christ. The Old Testament spoke of Israel as the Bride of Yahweh. The wedding between the bride and the groom--between Christ and His Church--will be solemnized at the Second Coming.

Presently the Bride awaits the coming of the Bridegroom. However, the bridegroom tarries until midnight. In the long vigil, the Church grows tired of waiting and becomes less vigilant. Suddenly, and with no warning, Jesus Christ will come:

*As the lightning from the east flashes to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.*

*Mt. 24:27*

Then:

*He will dispatch his angels "with a mighty trumpet blast, and they will assemble his chosen from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."*

*Mt. 24:31*

Some members of the Church have not been vigilant, but they are prepared to meet Christ. Others have been neither vigilant nor prepared. They lacked the necessary foresight to always be prepared for the coming of Christ. The oil in their lamps is depleted. Some things you cannot give to another regardless of your love for them. You can have faith in a person but you cannot give them faith. You can love a person but you cannot make them loving. In a word--you

cannot give Christian maturity to another Christian. Jesus told His disciples they must be the light of the world, and their light must shine before men so that they may see their good works and glorify God. When it is darkest, the light of the lamp is most needed. The imprudent virgins represent those Christians who grow tired--over the long haul--of doing good. The oil of the lamp is faith, which works in charity.

Some compare the imprudent virgins to those religious enthusiasts who delight in the manifestations of power within the kingdom, but avoid the dull work of daily tending the vineyard of the Lord. With the passing of time their fervor dries up and they become, in the dry wood of their lives, fruitless trees. The words of the parable sound much like the words and warning we heard earlier:

*When that day comes, many will plead with me, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? Have we not exorcised demons by its power? Did we not do many miracles in your name as well?" Then I will declare to them solemnly, "I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!"*  
Mt. 7:22-23

Previously, the Lord had said:

*None of those who cry out, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*  
Mt. 7:21

The parable relates that it will be the "coming" that will separate the wise from the foolish. The wheat and the weeds have become wise and imprudent virgins. Some see also, in the original intent of this parable, Israel as the foolish virgins, and the Gentiles as the prudent virgins.

### THE LAZY SERVANT

This parable is immediately followed by another in which Jesus says:

*The case of a man who was going on a journey is similar. He called in his servants and handed his funds over to them according to each man's abilities. To one he disbursed five thousand silver pieces, to a second two thousand, and to a third a thousand.* Mt. 25:14-15

In the Greek text, we are told they received talents--one man five, another man two, and the last man one. As mentioned earlier, one talent would have been equivalent to the daily wages paid to 6,000 men. So we see that even the man who received only one talent received considerable wealth. The parable goes on to relate that they invested their money and doubled it--all but the man receiving the one talent. The last man dug a hole and hid it in the ground. When the lord returned "*after a long absence,*" he blessed and rewarded the industrious and prudent servants. To them he said:

*Well done! You are an industrious and reliable servant. Since you were dependable in a small matter I will put you in charge of larger affairs. Come, share your master's joy!* *Mt. 25:21*

However, the lord severely judged and punished the servant who failed to invest his talent wisely. The man tried to excuse his behavior with these words:

*"My lord," he said, "I knew you were a hard man. You reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter, so out of fear I went off and buried your thousand silver pieces in the ground. Here is your money back."* *Mt. 25:24*

The lord brushed aside the excuse and got to the reality of the situation. Indeed the man had fears--he was fearful of work!

*His master exclaimed: "You worthless, lazy lout! You know I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter. All the more reason to deposit my money with the bankers, so that on my return I could have had it back with interest."* *Mt. 25:26-27*

An excuse never changes the results. An excuse never makes a person less incompetent--less lazy--less slothful.

It is the same theme--the "*coming*" will separate the industrious bees from the lazy drones. All the members of the Church have received the grace of God, in keeping with their ability to respond to it. Every Christian must eventually answer for their days of life on earth. It will not go easy with "*a tree of life*" that produces either evil fruit or no fruit at all. Paul writes:

*...when the just judgment of God will be revealed, when he will repay every man for what he has done: eternal life to those who strive for glory, honor, and immortality by patiently doing right; wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness.*

*Rm. 2:5-8*

The Lord ends His discourse with a description of final judgment:

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, he will sit upon his royal throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him.*

*Mt. 25:31*

We are told the wheat and weeds become the sheep and goats

*Then he will separate them into two groups, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.*

*Mt. 25:32b*

It will be the moment of universal judgment. The criterion for universal judgment will be one--Agape Love:

*I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.*

*Mt. 25:40*

## CHAPTER 22

### THE LAMB OF GOD

#### INTRODUCTION

There is a time of life and there is a purpose to life. The time of life can run out, and the purpose of life can be unfulfilled. There is so much time allotted to each person that can be imprudently wasted. What could measure the tragedy of losing one's soul through the misuse of the time of one's life?

As we follow the Gospel narrative recorded by Matthew we have reached the point in the life of Jesus when His time upon earth is fast running out. He is now only a few days away from physical death. In the time remaining to Him, He moves prudently to fulfill His purpose of life on earth. His death consummates the essential purpose of His life. His Resurrection from the dead will be the crowning success of His earthly life. Both His death and resurrection profoundly affect the destiny of mankind.

While on earth, Jesus beheld His life as the Light of the world, a life that illuminated for mankind the way to eternal life. Concerning those who considered themselves to be the religious lights of Israel, the scribes and Pharisees, their light appears as darkness in the Light of Christ. Through the example of their lives, they became blind guides leading the blind to a pit into which they would all fall. Jesus beheld their influence as corruptive "yeast" and warned His disciples against its influence. Jesus warned the disciples that their righteousness must surpass that of the teachers' of Israel or they, too, would fail to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said:

*I tell you, unless your holiness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of God. Mt. 5:20*

The Greek word *dikaiosune*, translated *holiness*, signifies that which God requires in order for a person's relationship to be in keeping with His Will. The word is also translated as *righteousness* or *justice*. The words of Jesus imply that the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees is not within the Will of God enough to permit their entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus explicitly expresses their spiritual deficiency when He speaks of their scrupulous



observance of impersonal legislation, such as paying tithes “*while neglecting the weightier matters of the law--justice and mercy and good faith (Mt. 23:23).*” He said to them: “*It is these you should have practiced, without neglecting the others (Mt. 23:23).*” They should pay their tithes but they should also ennoble and perfect their lives, in grace, through the exercise of mercy and justice.

Jesus advised His own disciples to aim to enter the kingdom of God “*through the narrow gate.*” He acknowledges:

*The gate that leads to damnation is wide, the road is clear, and many choose to travel it. But how narrow is the gate that leads to life, how rough the road, and how few there are who find it!           Mt. 7:13-14*

Jesus did not leave His disciples in the dark concerning the narrow and rough road to Paradise. He offered them His own earthly life as an example for them to follow. He highlighted for them a life of selfless service to the Community as the hallmark of Christ’s Way. Jesus said to the disciples, “*If anyone would serve me, let him follow me.*” To this He added, “*If anyone serves me, him the Father will honor (Jn. 12:26).*” The motivation that inspired Jesus’ life of service is made clear--Jesus was “*...moved with compassion (Mt. 20:34).*” Jesus pointed out that those who “*serve the rest,*” will be His greatest disciples. He implied that the disciples, like the stars, would differ in glory and those disciples who “*serve the needs of all (Mt. 20:27),*” would be the “*stars*” of the first magnitude. In a word--those who most humbled themselves in service to the Community would be the most exalted in heaven.

Jesus identified the way of service as the way of true love. We need to keep Jesus’ definition of love before our eyes and instill it in our hearts, in order to keep Christian love in its proper perspective. Guard it against love’s illusions, and distinguish it from the false coin or the coin of an alien kingdom. Jesus established not only the quality but the measure of love—“*Love one another as I have loved you (Jn. 15:12).*” He encouraged, “*Live on in my love (Jn. 15:9).*” In truth, it is the only means by which a disciple can “*live on.*” Jesus clarified the meaning of living on in His love:

*You will live in my love if you keep my commandments, even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and live in his love.*  
*Jn. 15:10*

As we have already pointed out, Jesus distilled His Father's commandments down to two in which He expressed the whole heart and essence of God's will:

*"You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments the whole law is based and the prophets as well.*

*Mt. 22:37-40*

The earthly life of Jesus perfectly incarnated these two commandments. Jesus expressed them daily in deed. Jesus defined love as, primarily, a matter and subject of the will--a will that readily and joyfully gives obedience to God's commandments. Jesus interpreted God's commandments to extend to the limits of love. The limits of love encompass the sacrifice of self-life. Jesus spoke of the extent of His service, "...to give his own life as a ransom for the many (Mt. 20:28)." With such an expression, he identified His service and His Love with suffering. As an example to His disciples, He proposed His image as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Jesus taught:

*There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.... The command I give you is this, that you love one another.*

*Jn.15:13-14,17*

The two commandments have mysteriously been reduced to One. That is the yoke He asks His disciples to take upon themselves--the burden He wants them to bear as a sign of true discipleship. These words of Jesus intimate that loving Him and being His friend involves laying down one's life for others. Jesus asks much love from His disciples--as much as it takes to give one's life completely in the service of others. Needless to say such love is, for human nature, a very narrow and rough way to life. Therefore—"many choose" the way that is wide and smooth. This is the reason that, in the end, many will be called, but only a few chosen. Jesus will choose those who choose Him.

As we study the Gospel, it becomes crystal clear that, although faith opens the door to salvation, Christian Love alone assures final salvation. Faith in Christ brings us to life, but Charity in Christ is the personal, willful commitment to live. Faith chooses Christ, whereas love chooses life in Christ. Faith that stimulates a daily walk in the Charity of Christ is the Way that leads to

Paradise. Faith is the first movement towards God but it is not the whole movement. Those who insist that "*Faith alone saves,*" must never forget the words of Jesus:

*None of those who cry out, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

*Mt. 7:21*

This also applies to those who only profess with their lips: "*Jesus is Lord!*" Those who quote Paul to support their faith-alone theory would do well to meditate upon Romans:

*The just judgment of God...will repay every man for what he has done: eternal life to those who strive for glory, honor, and immortality by patiently doing right; wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey truth and obey wickedness. Yes, affliction and anguish will come upon every man who has done evil. But there will be glory, honor, and peace for everyone who has done good.*

*Rm. 2:5-10*

*For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; it is those who keep it who will be declared just.*

*Rm. 2:13*

In Deuteronomy, we read about Moses as the end of his life approaches, and the purpose of his life is almost completed:

*When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said: "Take to heart all the warning which I have now given you and which you must impress on your children that you may carry out carefully every word of this law. For this is no trivial matter for you; rather, it means your very life, since it is by this means that you are to enjoy a long life on the land..."*

*Det. 32:45-47*

As Jesus' own life approaches its end, His last discourse to His disciples, as recorded by Matthew, echoes very much the sentiments expressed by Moses. Jesus' words have already implied that after His going to the Father, He would receive "*dominion, glory, and kingship (Dn. 7:14),*" and He would come in His glory and power to judge the earth:

*The Son of Man will come with his Father's glory accompanied by his angels. When he does, he will repay each man according to his conduct.*  
Mt. 16:27

Before Jesus terminates His teaching ministry, He clearly reveals to the disciples the criterion by which all men will be judged. In His teaching upon the Final Judgment, Jesus makes clear that the criterion will be love of others. This teaching re-affirms what has been the Gospel's criterion for true discipleship. True discipleship consists not so much in what has been heard and said about Christ but what one does in response to Christ's commands. People are declared "*righteous*" and inheritors of the kingdom of God at the Final Judgment by Christ because they carried out, in a practical and concrete fashion, Christ's commandment of love. Righteousness is not a matter of words, greetings, and blessings but a matter of concrete deeds of charity. As James wrote:

*My brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day, and you say to them, "Good-bye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed," but do not meet their bodily needs, what good is that? So it is with the faith that does nothing in practice. It is thoroughly lifeless.*  
Jas. 2:14-17

At the Last Judgment, Jesus will declare that people are "*righteous*" and "*saved*" because they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the homeless, clothed the naked, comforted the sick, and visited the imprisoned. Likewise, people will be condemned as evil and declared fit to dwell with devils and demons in Hell, because they neglected to do these corporeal works of mercy. They are declared guilty through neglect of mercy which appears, in the eyes of the Just Judge, as morally evil—as positive wrong doing. *Not* doing the Will of God, whether it is through positive action or neglectful action, renders one a fit companion for the Evil One. We now see that what makes the invited guests properly clothed is that these guests have put on, over everything else, the mantle of charity, which they have incarnated into their very souls by their daily practices of mercy. They loved the "*little ones*" of the earth in concrete acts of compassion. This, in the eyes of Christ, renders them fit companions for the God of Compassion.

To this list of corporeal works, the Church has added seven spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, to instruct the ignorant, to admonish sinners,

to forgive offenses, to bear wrongs patiently, to pray for persons living and dead. There can never be any dichotomy between the corporeal and spiritual works of mercy, for all fourteen are the exercises of mercy toward people--toward their persons. Human persons are so essentially a combination of body and soul that what is done for either the body or the soul is done for the person. What one neglects to do either for the body or the soul, one neglects to do for the person.

Some have critically observed that the universal judgment of mankind by Christ omits any reference to man's duties toward God; however, others see the criticism as invalid precisely because of the unique and mysterious identification of Jesus, the Son of God, with mankind. The Scriptures teach that all people are made in the image and likeness of God. In some way, what is done to man cannot be separated from what is done to God. Jesus Christ develops this truth by identifying Himself with the "*little ones*" of the earth.

It is clear from the Scripture teaching that Jesus identifies with the members of the Christian Church, but apparently the identification does not stay there. He also has identified Himself with every human being, and in a most particular way, with those most in need--the "*little one*"--the poor and humble of the earth. In a word, the lowest common denominator of mankind equals Jesus Christ. Because people fail to know this truth, they fail to recognize Jesus in every other person. They fail to respond to Him in love and mercy.

In truth, it can be said that Jesus Christ has no age. He is the unborn child at the door of life. He is the person in the vigor and strength of physical life. He is the old one on the edge of death. It can be said that Jesus Christ comes in many colors. He is brown and He is black. He is a white man and a red man. He appears in many different blends and shades of color. Jesus Christ is all ages, all colors, and all races. He speaks every language. He lives in every land. But overall, within all of these, He most closely identifies with the suffering, the poor, and the oppressed of the earth. Apparently, they are most in need of His identification. He makes the mercy and love shown to them the assured way to salvation.

The Jews, the Hindus, the Moslems, and the Buddhists may not accept Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, as do we Christians; nevertheless, the Son of Man accepts and identifies with every Jew, Hindu, Moslem, and Buddhist as His brother. Jesus makes them the proper recipients of Christian love and brotherhood. Pope John Paul II wrote in *Redemptor Hominis (Man's Redeemer)*:

*The Church knows with the certainty of faith that the Redemption which took place at the Cross, has definitely restored dignity to each human person and given back meaning to life in the world.*

We may say the bottom line is that one's behavior toward other human beings is one's behavior towards God. To be a watchful and foresighted servant means to recognize the Son of Man in all human beings in need. To be a disciple who is "*ready*," means being ready to meet those needs. The faithful disciple of Jesus Christ translates love into active service--concrete deeds of mercy, upon which salvation depends.

As individual Christians, we not only have a moral responsibility for those needs at our own door, but as members of the Christian society--the Church--we have a moral responsibility to society as a whole. We are obliged to be a Church that is involved with, and works for, social justice in our world.

Speaking in Haiti, John Paul II said: "*The church has a prophetic mission in this field inseparable from its religious mission, and it demands the liberty to carry it out.*"

He went on to teach:

*It is the church, the entire church, the church in Haiti that must commit itself to the hilt for the good of the brothers and sisters of all, but, especially, the poorest...The poor of every kind must be able to hope once again....There is a deep need for justice, for a better distribution of wealth, a more equitable organization of society....People need to eat, to have medical care, housing, schools, honest work, social security, respect for family responsibilities, and the fundamental rights of man....I make an appeal to all those who have power, wealth, and virtue that they understand their serious and urgent responsibility with respect to their brothers and sisters.*

In Honduras John Paul II said:

*We must promote all that is according to the will of the Father who is in heaven: charity, mutual aid, education in the faith, culture, and the betterment of the poorest, respect for all, especially the most needy, those that suffer the most--the alienated.*

Pope John Paul II made it crystal clear that Christians must reject every means that is essentially unchristian in the struggle and fight for social justice for the poor. He firmly stated:

*We must reject all that is opposed to the Gospel: hate, violence, injustice, lack of work, the imposition of ideologies that debase the dignity of man and woman—You will do this without violence, without murder; without internal struggles which only create new oppressions. You do it in the respect and love of liberty. Pope Paul VI taught: “The Church links human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ...The cause of human dignity and of human rights is the cause of Christ and His Gospel.” Address to U.S. Bishops in 1976*

The prophet Ezekiel condemned the wicked city of Sodom, not for her sexual immorality, but for her social injustice:

*And look at the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were proud, sated with food, complacent in their prosperity, and they gave no help to the needy.*  
*Ez. 16:49*

God has given mankind stewardship over the earth and its goods. When stewards oppress their fellow servants, beat them, deprive them of the necessities of life and human rights, and reduce them to a social status that destroys their sense of human dignity, they are wicked stewards of whom the Lord has said, “....*Brood of serpents! How can you escape condemnation to Gehenna (Mt. 23:33)?*” Those who close their eyes to these situations, not wanting to be involved; those who benefit economically and socially from the social suppression of others; and those who imprudently remain silent and lift not a finger to relieve the burdens of the afflicted are under the same Divine sentence—“*How can you escape condemnation to Gehenna!*”

It is not an act of righteousness for Christians to seek social justice through violent means that perpetuates injustice, thus creating greater injustices. Christians are obliged, under the Christian mandate, to seek justice through non-violent means. Violence breeds upon violence. A good and holy end does not justify the use of an evil and unholy means to achieve its goal. The Church condemns the principle that the end justifies the means. We are forbidden to directly will evil for a good purpose.

Professedly, Christian people cannot go the way of violence without betraying the cause of Christ. To seek social justice through violent means betrays the Gospel of Jesus Christ; it is to follow a false messiah. The Noon-Day Devil has deluded many Christians into believing that they have a conscious responsibility to support violence as the only means available to bring about social justice. They are led to believe that out of the environment created through such means, Christian principles and life can flourish. However, their very actions witness to the lack of faith in Christian principles. Their very deeds proclaim the impotency of the Christian doctrine to produce justice and peace upon earth. They reduce Christ to a dreamer. The faithful and farsighted Christian firmly holds to the teachings of Jesus Christ knowing Him to be the most profound realist. To espouse violence as a means to achieve social justice betrays the cause of Christ. May we not say in the spirit of Christ, that at the judgment Mahatma Gandhi will rise with the present generation and be the one to condemn it, for he demonstrated by his life and the victories it achieved, the effectuation of Christ's doctrine of love and non-violence?

We are told in Deuteronomy that when Moses completed his discourses to Israel, he proceeded to Mount Nebo to glimpse the Promised Land prior to his death. We read:

*When Moses had finished speaking these words to all Israel, he said to them: "...The Lord has told me that I shall not cross this Jordan. It is the Lord, your God, who will cross before you;... It is Joshua who will cross before you, as the Lord promised. Det. 31:1-3*

## THE FEAST OF PASSOVER

Matthew now records:

*Now when Jesus had finished all these discourses, he declared to his disciples: "You know that in two days' time it will be Passover, and that the Son of Man is to be handed over to be crucified." Mt. 26:1-2*

The mere mention of the Passover evoked powerful sentiments within the hearts of the Jewish People. This feast celebrated their freedom from slavery in Egypt. They first celebrated it on the night before their Exodus from Egypt. As instructed by Moses, a year old lamb was slain and its blood marked the doorposts of their homes. That night, as the Jewish People gathered to eat the



lamb in joyful anticipation, the Angel of Death passed over the land killing the first-born of all the Egyptians. Every house marked by the blood of the lamb was spared by the Angel of Death. From now on the Jewish People would also see their first-born as belonging to the Lord. That blood of the lamb, in the years to come, became a symbol of their deliverance, not only from slavery, but also from death. Through the centuries they would sing, "*By the blood of the lamb we have been saved.*"

The very day following the first feast of the Passover, a freed Israel entered into the desert, beginning its journey to the Promised Land with Moses in the lead. Like a good shepherd, Moses led the people out of slavery to freedom and toward the Promised Land. Moses decreed that Israel must yearly celebrate the Passover as a most special memorial recalling God's merciful, salvific Will toward His people.

During Israel's long desert sojourn, Yahweh fed His people with a miraculous bread called *manna*, which fell daily from heaven (except upon the Sabbath). The very evening before Joshua led the Israelites on the siege of Jericho, the Gateway to the Promised Land, the people celebrated the feast of Passover on the plains before Jericho. We are told that this Passover celebration marked the end of the manna falling from heaven. Now the Israelites would live by the fruits of the Promised Land.

The Scriptures picture Jesus as looking serenely toward Mount Calvary, and His entrance into the Promised Land as the *Pioneer* of our salvation. Somehow, most mysteriously, with His crucifixion upon Mount Calvary, a new Exodus begins. Paul, perhaps, understood it well when he wrote, "*For our sakes God made him who did not know sin, to be sin, so that in him we might become the very holiness of God (2Cor. 5:21).*"

Jesus moves bravely forward to embrace the final sequence of events that will terminate His life on earth. He taught others not to be afraid of those who could kill only the physical body. With His face set like flint Jesus moves forward to embrace completely the Will of God. He faces the terrible trials ahead with faith in God's Word. He will suffer and die with hope in His resurrection from the dead because of what that death and resurrection will mean to others. He is moved by compassion to embrace death. The words of Isaiah were before His eyes and inflamed His will:

*Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear....Because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; And he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.* *Is. 53:11-12*

The Jews often looked back with some nostalgia upon those days in the desert; not upon its hardships, but upon the evident presence of Yahweh in the life of Israel. It picturesquely saw itself as a child being born to safety upon the wings of a mighty eagle. A strong belief existed that the Messiah would come on the feast of Passover and once again, as of old, manna would fall from heaven.

According to Matthew, Jesus goes to His death on the feast of Passover. The Gospel of John places it on the eve of Passover at the moment the lambs were being slain in the temple precincts for the paschal celebration. The feast of the Passover will be celebrated on Friday.

On the Wednesday before, Jesus goes to Bethany, a town 1 5/8 miles east of Jerusalem, to spend the evening in the home of friends. Matthew and Mark mention that Jesus was a guest in the house of Simon the Leper, apparently a man healed by Jesus. When John refers to this incident, he places it in the house of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. They all agree that, while in the house, Jesus was anointed with perfume by a woman. John says the woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It is recorded that the woman poured a bottle of costly perfume over the head of Jesus. Mark places the cost at around 300 denarii (three hundred days' wage). Such a scene is mentioned by Luke, but in a different context. He places Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee, and calls the woman a "*public sinner*." We are told that the disciples viewed the woman's act as foolish and wasteful:

*When the disciples saw this they grew indignant, protesting: "What is the point of such an extravagance? This could have been sold for a good price and the money given to the poor."* *Mt. 26:8-9*

According to John, it was Judas who protested. John added that Judas was a thief and had no concern for the poor.

Jesus interpreted this spontaneous, extravagant act as a loving gesture, with a deep symbolic meaning that was lost upon His audience. The symbolic meaning gave cause enough for the use of the perfume. Jesus already knew He

was a man marked by members of the Jewish Sanhedrin to be murdered. What would be done to Jesus had clearly been decided upon.

*At that time the chief priests and elders of the people were assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas. They plotted to arrest Jesus by some trick and kill him; but they said, "Not during the festival for fear of a riot among the people." Mt. 26:3-4*

Only the details of the *how* and *when* remained to be worked out. They would have a surprising solution offered to them for their problem. The men who once counseled King Herod have become his spiritual heirs. Where Herod failed, they would succeed. However, despite their appearance of control, the events that transpire will occur precisely as decreed by God. They decided "*not during the festival;*" however God decreed that his Son would die at Passover. The forces through which the Will of God will be accomplished have been set in motion.

This same Son of Man, who will come in mighty power and glory to judge mankind, must first be rejected by the world, and suffer the triumph and rejoicing of His enemies, as He sinks like some torpedoed ship in defeat and death. Out of this cruel disaster, God's victory emerges--a victory unseen, unrealized by man, but a victory that alters the spiritual tide of history and the final destiny of mankind.

As the death sentence had already been passed informally upon Jesus, the Lord knew it would be quickly executed, and He would be buried quickly, without formality. For the body of a Jew to be buried without being anointed was considered a disgrace. Concerning His anointment with perfume, Jesus said to His disciples:

*Why do you criticize the woman? It is a good deed she has done for me. The poor you will always have with you but you will not always have me. By pouring this perfume on my body, she has contributed toward my burial preparation. I assure you, wherever the good news is proclaimed throughout the world, what she did will be spoken of as her memorial.* Mt. 26:10-13

This is the only recorded incident within the Gospel that carries the promise of a perpetual and universal memory. Perhaps it does symbolize Jesus' estimation of those generous acts of love ministered to His Body by the

Church. It has been noted the woman's act profoundly impressed the evangelists: it is recorded, in one fashion or another, by all four of them. John makes it a memorial to a woman called Mary.

## THE BETRAYAL OF JESUS

Matthew speaks of the following day, the 14th of Nisan, as "*the first day of the feast of the Unleavened Bread.*" (In actual fact the feast began the day following the Passover, and according to Josephus, lasted eight days.) Matthew's reference probably implies no more than that the time had arrived to make preparations for the Passover. Before the Passover, all the old leaven was thrown out of Jewish homes. Paul had this custom in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians:

*Christ our Passover has been sacrificed. Let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, that of corruption and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.* 1 Cor. 5:7,8

On the 14th of Nisan, the disciples of Jesus go in two different directions. One of the Twelve Apostles, Judas, goes to the chief priests and, to their great surprise and delight, offers to betray Jesus and to put Jesus into their hands at a convenient time and place--for a price.

*"What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver, and from that time on he kept looking for an opportunity to hand him over.* Mt. 26:15-16

The thirty pieces of silver was the sum prescribed by law to be paid in restitution for the accidental death of a slave. In Zechariah, the "*thirty pieces of silver*" refers to the sum paid for the rejected shepherd of Israel: "*....And they counted out my wages, thirty pieces of silver (Zec. 11:12).*" In Zechariah it is considered a contemptible sum.

At Jesus' direction, the other disciples go into Jerusalem to prepare for the feast. Jesus told them:

*Go to this man in the city and tell him: "The Teacher says, 'My appointed time draws near. I am to celebrate the Passover with my disciples in your house.'" The disciples then did as Jesus had ordered, and prepared the Passover supper.* Mt. 26:17-19

In Mark we read that only two disciples were sent into the city to make preparations. The place for celebrating the Passover was kept secret from the rest of the Apostles, obviously to guard against the treachery of Judas impeding the celebration. We are told that the Passover was celebrated in a spacious *upstairs room* called, in Greek, a *cenacle*. Tradition places this in the home of John Mark in the Mt. Zion section of Jerusalem. This *Cenacle* was to become the first Christian Church.

Matthew records: "*When it grew dark he reclined at table with the Twelve (Mt. 26:20).*" The expression "*it grew dark,*" may be an ominous reference to the presence of evil at the Last Supper. We are told:

*In the course of the meal he said, "I assure you, one of you is about to betray me." Distressed at this, they began to say to him one after another, "Surely it is not I Lord?" He replied: "The man who has dipped his hand into the dish with me is the one who will hand me over. The Son of Man is departing, as Scripture says of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. Better for him if he had never been born." Then Judas, his betrayer spoke: "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "It is you who have said it."*

*Mt. 26:21-25*

We know from the Rule of the Community at Qumran that there was a hierarchic order maintained in the taking of food. Jesus' reference to the hand dipping "*with me*" has been seen as a rebellious sign in which Judas refused to respect the position of Jesus. All of the disciples realize Jesus has uttered a prophecy and they fearfully question if they will be the one. All but one refers to Jesus as "*Lord*"; Judas calls Him "*Rabbi,*" and thereby reveals his infidelity--his lack of faith in Jesus. John the evangelist said that, "*The devil had already induced Judas, Son of Simon Iscariot, to hand him over (Jn. 13:2).*" At the Last Supper, John tells us that "*Satan entered his heart (Jn. 13:27).*" Thus Satan fully empowered Judas to carry out his evil design against Jesus. According to John, Judas immediately left the supper, and John recorded, "*It was night (Jn. 13:30).*"

The Church teaches it was this night, in keeping with the testimony of the Scriptures, that Jesus instituted the rite of the Holy Eucharist. The words used by Matthew form such a self-contained unit that they could have been easily lifted out of an early liturgical rite in use at Matthew's time. Matthew records:

*During the meal Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "Take this and eat it," he said, "this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them. "All of you must drink from it," he said, "for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins."*

*Mt. 26:26-28*

## THE LAST SUPPER

The institution of this sacred rite is also described in the gospel accounts of Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-20. The account appears also in one of the earliest Scriptures—Paul's letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 11:23-30). The similarity of these four accounts indicates how well the memory of the Lord's Supper survived within the oral tradition of the Church. It likewise suggests the importance of this ritual within Christian worship. Scholars believe that the accounts given in Mark and Matthew reflect the worship of the Jerusalem Community, and the accounts given in Luke and Paul reflect the worship of the Antioch Community. The major distinction between these two sets of accounts is that we find in the accounts of Luke and Paul the additional words: "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" These words imply that Jesus commanded the perpetuation of this ritual within the Church.

All four accounts clearly indicate the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus. By the power of the Word, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of the Lord. The words of the Scriptures do not allow for a merely a symbolic interpretation. Jesus does not say, "*This bread is my Body.*" Rather he said, "*Take this....this is my body. This is my blood (Mt. 26:26, 27).*" The use of the demonstrative pronoun *this*, without the nouns *bread* and *wine*, signified that what Jesus held in His hand was no longer bread and wine. What Jesus held in His hands He identified as "*my body,*" "*my blood.*" Nothing in the narrative indicates that figurative language is being used.

We find the earliest Scripture reference to the Eucharist in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, written around 50 A.D. Paul warns them about eating food sacrificed to idols. He argues that such food is offered to demons and by eating the sacrificed food one communicates with demons. Paul implies such to be unthinkable for a Christian who communicates with Jesus Himself, through the Eucharist. Paul writes:

*Is not the cup of blessing we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ?... You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons... Do we mean to provoke the Lord to jealous anger? 1 Cor. 10:16, 21-22*

*I received from the Lord what I handed on to you namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord (and the forgiveness of sins) until he comes! This means that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord. A man should examine himself first; only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks a judgment on himself. That is why many among you are sick and infirm, and why so many are dying.*

*1 Cor. 11:23-30*

Paul plainly states that the early Church believed in the Real Presence of Jesus in "*the Lord's Supper*." Paul implies that unworthy participation in the "*Lord's Supper*" results in one's falling away from the Lord.

The last Gospel account to be written, that by John, clearly teaches the true nature and effects of the Holy Eucharist. Here, Jesus tells the Jews that He is the Bread from Heaven:

*"I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread he shall live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world." At this the Jews quarreled among themselves saying, "How can he give us his flesh to eat?" Thereupon Jesus said to them: "Let me solemnly assure you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood real drink. The man who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him....so the man who feeds on me will have life because of me."*

*Jn. 6:51-57*

The language of Jesus is extremely clear and forceful. The words do not encourage a symbolic interpretation, but stress the fact that the Body and Blood is real food and real drink. The Greek word used for *feeds* is quite realistic, implying *to munch, gnaw, and chew*. In the language of the Bible, the figurative expression to eat a person's flesh and blood, meant to persecute him in a bloody way, to destroy him (See Ps. 27:2, Is. 9:18, Micah 3:3). Jesus could not have intended a figurative, but a realistic interpretation. His hearers certainly understood His words in a realistic manner: "*This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously (Jn. 6:60)?*" When Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus, our Lord corrected him. This time Jesus does not. We are told: "*...from this time on, many of his disciples broke away and would not remain in his company any longer (Jn. 6:66).*" Jesus does not call them back to tell them there has been a misunderstanding; rather, He turns to the Twelve:

*"Do you want to leave me too?" Simon Peter gave the only answer a true disciple can give before the mystery of the Eucharist: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe; we are convinced that you are God's holy one."*

*Jn. 6:67-69*

The name *Holy Eucharist* comes from the fact that all four scriptural accounts begin with *the breaking of the bread*, and giving *thanks*. Both of these expressions became terms symbolizing the ritual of the Lord's Supper. The Greek word of *hanks* was *eucharistein*. It is a very rich word, for it expresses the proper conduct of one who is the recipient of a gift. It expresses not only a thankful attitude, but one that gives an outward expression of gratitude. In the Church, the Lord's Supper is usually referred to as the Holy Eucharist.

Saint Luke implies that between the temptation of Jesus in the desert and the Passion, Jesus and His disciples were free of temptations from Satan. This period ended for Jesus, and the Church, with the return of Satan at the Passion. Luke ties together the return of Satan and the institution of the Holy Eucharist by Jesus at the Last Supper. It is the return of the manna from heaven at Passover. However, this is the true manna which has come down from heaven.

The Eucharist appears to be instituted for the period of conflict that is now beginning for the disciples of Jesus. As Elijah, exhausted by the trials of his prophetic mission and on the verge of despair, is refreshed by the bread of heaven, and strengthened by it to walk forty days to encounter Yahweh on



Mt. Sinai, so the disciples will find in the Holy Eucharist--the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ--the power to persevere in Christian Discipleship. The Eucharist strengthens the Christian to come through all that lies ahead, and to still stand erect to meet the Son of Man.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist replaces the Presence of the historical Jesus, for it truly contains Jesus, the Source of grace Himself. In this Sacrament, the disciple finds the strength and protection of the Risen Savior. It is forever the sacrament of Faith. Belief in it continually expresses a concrete confidence in the Word of Christ and in His divinity. A frequent and worthy reception of the Eucharist carries the promise: "*He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day (Jn. 6:54).*"

Jesus' words to His disciples imply that even though death will end this communion they have enjoyed with Him, it cannot destroy their union with Him. It extends beyond death, and the Eucharist will remain a sign in this life that one day they will be reunited with Him in the kingdom of Heaven. They will one day sit with Him at the heavenly banquet:

*I tell you, I will not drink this fruit of the vine from now until the day when I drink it new with you in my Father's reign. Mt. 26:29*

Matthew records that the Passover celebration that had inaugurated the New Covenant between Jesus Christ and His disciples--a covenant sealed by His own blood--ended with the traditional hymns of praise. Then, Jesus and His disciples departed from Jerusalem, "...*They walked out to the Mount of Olives (Mt. 26:30).*"

### THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN

Long ago John wrote of Jesus: "*He needed no one to give him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in man's heart (Jn. 2:25).*" Jesus knew the devastating effects His arrest and death would have upon the disciples. Their faith would not withstand the trial. He tried to forewarn and forearm them. That very evening He said to them:

*Tonight your faith in me will be shaken, for Scripture has it: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be dispersed."*

*Mt. 26:31*

However, when the darkness has passed with the coming of a new day, they will be reunited once again under His leadership, "...*But after I am raised up, I will go to Galilee ahead of you (Mt. 26:32).*"

Peter, speaking from his own feelings and emotions, questioned Jesus' words, and refused to admit they applied to him. In his present relationship with Jesus, he experienced nothing but love and great confidence in Him. One can only be certain of one's disposition in the present. One can never be sure how one will feel and act when the circumstances of life have been drastically changed. It has been said that it is the great crises in life that raise the curtain, revealing a person's true self. Cold reality always destroys illusions and fantasies. Peter responded to Jesus:

*"Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be shaken!" Jesus said to him, "I give you my word, before the cock crows tonight you will deny me three times." Mt. 26:32-34*

Even in the face of Jesus' prophecy, even when Jesus said, "*I give you my word,*" Peter's self-confidence refused to be called into question. Apparently, there was more confidence in himself, than in the Word of Jesus. Peter adds in the face of Jesus' words, "*Even though I have to die with you, I will never disown you (Mt. 26:35).*" All the others were as firm as Peter in their denial, and their conscious commitment to Jesus: "*And all the other disciples said the same (Mt. 26:35).*" Some people can only learn through bitter experience.

That last evening, Jesus led His disciples through the Kidron Valley up the slopes of the Mount of Olives, to a garden called Gethsemane, in order to pray. He separated Peter, James, John and Himself a bit from the rest of the disciples.

From this moment, Jesus began to experience, in His human nature, the full impact of being that Servant of Yahweh who shall "*justify many (Is. 53:11),*" and shall "*be counted among the wicked (Is. 53:12).*" His spirit began to experience the guilt and burden of this wickedness. Waves of fear and sorrow swept over Him and began to inundate His very soul. His humanity trembled and shook under the terrible burden as He "*began to experience sorrow and distress.*"

Then He said to them, "*My heart is nearly broken with sorrow. Remain here and stay awake with me (Mt. 26:38).*" Had He ever asked His disciples for

anything for Himself? At this moment He experienced such loneliness and alienation; He needed their physical comfort and sympathy. The disciples would not meet his need--they could not; they were not that free. Their own needs dominated them, which reveals so much about those earlier protestations of love and fidelity. They slept in the face of Jesus' needs. Only in prayer could Jesus find strength and comfort. (The precise thing the foolish disciples failed to do.) Jesus prayed:

*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Still, let it be as you would have it, not as I...My Father, if this cannot pass me by without my drinking it, your will be done!* Mt. 26:39-42

Luke records:

*In his anguish he prayed with all the greater intensity, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.* Lk. 22:44

In this experience of utter loneliness and abandonment, He who gave all to others could not find an ounce of human consolation in His agony. Three times He came to His disciples. They were asleep. He warned them that if they could not stay awake for His sake, they should do so for their own sakes: He said to Peter,

*So you could not stay awake with me for even an hour? Be on guard, and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but nature is weak.* Mt. 26:40-41, Mk. 14:37b-38

And so, the hour came upon them when...

*...the Son of Man is to be handed over to the power of evil men: and they are unprepared. Jesus awakened them when the hour of trial arrived—"Get up! Let us be on our way! See, my betrayer is here."* Mt. 26:45-46, Mk. 14:41b-42

## THE ARREST OF JESUS

The storm of agony and terror has passed, dissipated by the power of prayer. Fortified and strengthened, Jesus goes forth to meet His betrayer and the soldiers who come to arrest Him as a criminal. Truly, night has come!

*While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived accompanied by a great crowd with swords and clubs....His betrayer had arranged to give them a signal, saying, "The man I shall embrace is the one; take hold of him." He immediately went over to Jesus, said to him, "Peace, Rabbi," and embraced him. Jesus answered, "Friend, do what you are here for!" At that moment they stepped forward to lay hands on Jesus, and arrested him.*

*Mt. 26:47-50*

At this point, Peter reacted in the only way he was capable; he pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus said to him:

*Put back your sword where it belongs. Those who use the sword are sooner or later destroyed by it.*

*Mt. 26:52*

This is not the means by which the apostles and disciples of Christ are to spread or defend the kingdom of God on earth. At this point Matthew relates, "*Then all the disciples deserted him and fled (Mt. 26:56).*"

As the night proceeds, a sharp contrast is drawn between Jesus and Peter. Jesus is led off to face an emergency session of the Sanhedrin where He stands composed and silent before His accusers and their false witnesses. He speaks only when the high priest commands Him—"I order you to tell us under oath before the living God whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God (Mt. 26:63)." Jesus' answer confirms that He is the Messiah, the Son of God. The high priest accuses Him of "*blasphemy.*" The Sanhedrin hands down its verdict: "*He deserves death (Mt. 26:66)!*" Then the court of law deteriorates into a circus, with Jesus as its clown and victim:

*...Then they began to spit in his face and to hit him. Others slapped him, saying: "Play the prophet for us, Messiah! Who struck you?"*

*Mt. 26:67-68*

Amidst it all, Jesus stands tall and serene, His face set like flint. Matthew relates, "*Peter kept following him at a distance (Mt. 26:58).*" Fear was distancing Peter from Jesus. The situation was causing him to become cowardly; he could no longer publicly associate himself with Jesus. Jesus confirms truth before the high court of Israel, and Peter denies truth in the courtyard around the fire. When accused by a servant girl of having been "*with Jesus the Galilean,*" Peter responds, "*I do not know what you are talking about (Mt. 26:70).*" When a second girl made it clear what they were talking about, that he had been "*with Jesus the Nazarene,*" he made it clear with an oath—"*I do not know the man (Mt. 26:72).*" Peter's words disclaimed his discipleship. He was not a disciple of Jesus. When another went on to point out his Galilean identity with Jesus, Peter cursed and swore his denials. Some say these words imply that Peter cursed Jesus. Matthew relates, "*Just then a cock began to crow and Peter remembered the prediction of Jesus....He went out and began to weep bitterly (Mt. 26:75).*"

On the night before Jesus died, the night in which He instituted the Holy Eucharist and inaugurated the New Covenant in His blood, Judas, the apostle, betrayed Jesus; all the disciples deserted Jesus; and Peter, the first among the Apostles, denied and cursed Jesus. These infidelities demonstrate how fragile a thing Christian discipleship can be: *Be on guard, and pray....The spirit is willing but nature is weak (Mt. 26:41; Mk.14:38)!*

## CHAPTER 23

### THE VICTORY OF JESUS CHRIST

#### INTRODUCTION

In the time of Jesus Christ the highest religious authority in Judea was the Great Sanhedrin at Jerusalem. The word *Sanhedrin*, coming from the Greek *sunedrion*, meant *assembly* or *senate*. It appeared as the Supreme Court of Judea between 223-187 B.C. Its membership consisted of seventy men plus the reigning high priest. It traced its biblical roots of formation to Yahweh's directive to Moses: to share the burden of his authority with seventy elders among the Israelites (Num. 11:16-24). Some believe that Ezra organized such a body after the return from Exile. After the Exile, the Persians permitted the Jews authority in local matters. Later the Greeks permitted the Jews to be governed and represented by a senate (*gerousia*) composed of the elders of the people. The *elders* were those men recognized as the heads of important clans and families among the Jews. The Sanhedrin received wide power from the Romans. Julius Caesar extended power over Judea to the Sanhedrin.

From 6-66 A.D., the internal government of the Jews remained under Jewish control. The Sanhedrin was charged with the responsibility to study religious questions and to act as a political council. It intervened in the relationship of the Romans with the Jews. It controlled everything pertaining to religion which, in a theocracy like Israel, implies that it controlled everything. The Sanhedrin could order arrests, and it possessed its own police force. Speaking of the power of the Sanhedrin, Josephus wrote that it was forbidden by law "...to slay any man, even though he was a wicked man, unless he had been first condemned to suffer death by the Sanhedrin." However, under the Romans, the Sanhedrin could not execute the death sentence without the permission of the Roman procurator. Nevertheless, it did seem to possess the tacit permission of Rome to execute any Gentile who violated the temple sanctuary by passing beyond the Court of the Gentiles into the forbidden area.

Membership in the Sanhedrin consisted of the priests from the leading secular families who composed the Sadducee Party. These were the families

from which the high priests came. From the time of Queen Salome of Alexandra (76-67 B.C.), the Pharisee Party had gained a strong foothold in the Sanhedrin. Herod the Great preferred them over the Sadducees. By the time of Jesus, both were equally represented within the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin met formally two days a week--Mondays and Thursdays--never on the Sabbath or on a feast day. When in session its members sat in a semi-circle in the order of their seniority. The *Nassi*, the titular president of the assembly, sat in the middle with the *Abet Bethlin* at his side, who acted as chairman of the assembly when the Sanhedrin acted as a court of law. Two clerks were present during a court session. One clerk recorded the votes of acquittal and the other clerk recorded the votes of condemnation. Any arguments for acquittal had to be heard first. If any member spoke for acquittal, he could not later speak for condemnation. However, the reverse was not true--one who had spoken for condemnation *could* change and speak for acquittal. For the proceedings of the court to be valid, twenty-three members had to be present.

Voting started with the youngest proceeding to the eldest, in order to avoid any peer pressure. A simple majority was needed for acquittal, but a two-thirds majority was needed for condemnation. For example, in a court of twenty-three, if twelve voted for acquittal and eleven for condemnation, the defendant was declared acquitted. If twelve voted for condemnation and eleven for acquittal, no decision could be given. Other members had to be added to the court, up to seventy-one, until either the simple majority vote for acquittal or the two-thirds vote for condemnation was reached.

The law remained on the side of the accused. The Sanhedrin itself could not initiate proceedings against a person. A person first had to be publicly accused of a crime by at least two witnesses. In the case of capital punishment, the witnesses were obliged to hurl the first stones. If the witnesses were proved to be false, they suffered the penalty for the crime for which they falsely accused another. Whenever the Sanhedrin voted for acquittal, the decision could be declared on the day of the trial. When the decision was one of condemnation, the sentence had to be deferred to the next day. In any case, where there was a unanimous vote for condemnation, such a sentence had to wait twenty-four hours before being decreed and carried out. They were not above suspicion of being prejudiced. The Sanhedrin could meet at night, but it was forbidden to pass a death sentence at that time.

Josephus acknowledged that the reigning high priest presided over the Sanhedrin. The Jewish high priest derived his authority from his sacred office, which Aaron, the brother of Moses, first held. The high priest was the acknowledged head of the priestly families and the Levites. As prescribed by the Scriptures, he was robed in such a manner as to be recognized, at first glance, as one set apart from the people. When installed as the high priest, he was anointed with oil as were the kings of old. The common people saw him as the incarnation of the law of Moses, and they surrounded him with worshipful respect. He possessed authority, both moral and spiritual. The political masters of the Jews preferred to remain on good terms with the high priest because they recognized him as the real moral and spiritual power in the land. He possessed the power to move people politically in one direction or the other.

As already mentioned, the family of Annas virtually retained the power of the position of high priest from the year 7 A.D., when Quirinius, the legate of Syria, appointed Annas to the office, until the Jewish revolt from Rome. Annas held the position for fourteen years, and was succeeded by his sons and his son-in-law, Caiaphas. Caiaphas held the position for eighteen years until he was deposed by Vitellius, legate to Syria, in 36 A.D., when Pontius Pilate was deposed as procurator and recalled to Rome.

The Acts of the Apostles presents this interesting case of Paul before the Sanhedrin:

*Paul gazed intently at the Sanhedrin. Then he said, "Brothers, to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God." At that, the high priest Ananias ordered his attendants to strike Paul on the mouth. Paul said to him in rebuttal: "You are the one God will strike, you whitewashed wall! You sit there judging men according to the law, yet you violate the law yourself by ordering me to be struck!" At this, the attendants protested, "How dare you insult God's high priest?" Paul answered: "My brothers, I did not know that he was the high priest. Indeed, Scripture has it, 'You shall not curse a prince of your people!'"* Acts 23:1-5



The Acts also records that Peter and John appeared before the Sanhedrin for questioning:

*When the leaders, the elders, and the scribes assembled the next day in Jerusalem, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly class were there.*

*Acts 4:5-6*

Later this group ordered all the apostles to be scourged and forbade them from speaking about Jesus. Peter responded to their prohibition:

*Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight for us to obey you rather than God. Surely we cannot help speaking of what we have heard and seen.*

*Acts 4:19-20*

On the night Jesus was arrested, John relates that the soldiers first took Him to the house of Annas for interrogation. He recorded:

*They led him first to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year. (It was Caiaphas who had proposed to the Jews the advantage of having one man die for the people.)...The high priest questioned Jesus, first about his disciples, then about his teaching. Jesus answered by saying: "I have spoken publicly to any who would listen. I always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area where all the Jews come together. There was nothing secret about anything I said. Why do you question me? Question those who heard me when I spoke. It should be obvious that they will know what I said." At this reply, one of the guards who was standing nearby gave Jesus a sharp blow on the face. "Is that the way to answer the high priest?" he said. Jesus replied, "If I said anything wrong produce the evidence, but if I spoke the truth why hit me?" Annas next sent him, bound, to the high priest Caiaphas.*

*Jn. 18:12-14, 19-24*

Matthew omits any reference to this interrogation, and begins immediately with the night trial in the house of Caiaphas. The trial would have begun with the recitation of the Shema:

*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.* Deut. 6:4-5

The next step in the trial would be to call forth witnesses against the defendant. Mark relates:

*The chief priests with the whole Sanhedrin were busy soliciting testimony against Jesus that would lead to his death, but they could not find any. Many spoke against him falsely under oath, but their testimony did not agree. Some, for instance, on taking the stand, testified falsely by alleging, "We heard him declare, 'I will destroy this temple made by human hands,' and 'In three days I will construct another not made by human hands.'" Even so, their testimony did not agree.* Mk. 14:55-59

They had already cowered into silence any opposition to their evil plans. John had recorded:

*One of their own number, Nicodemus (the man who had come to him), spoke up to say, "Since when does our law condemn any man without first hearing him and knowing the facts?" "Do not tell us you are a Galilean too," they taunted him. "Look it up. You will not find the Prophet coming from Galilee."* Jn. 7:50-52

Only when the trial failed to proceed as the high priest anticipated, did he resort to direct questioning of Jesus in such a way as to force him to convict himself in their eyes. Such a procedure was completely contrary to Jewish practice. However, when the high priest, acting as the highest religious authority in Israel, put his questions in such a form to Jesus, Jesus was obliged to respond truthfully. Mark records:

*The high priest rose to his feet before the court and began to interrogate Jesus: "Have you no answer to what these men testify against you?" But Jesus remained silent; he made no reply. Once again the high priest interrogated him: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Then Jesus answered: "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." At that the high priest tore his robes and said: "What further need do we have of witnesses? You*

*have heard the blasphemy. What is your verdict?" They all concurred in the verdict "guilty," with its sentence of death.*

*Mk. 14:60-64*

Luke implies that a second interrogation of Jesus occurred the following morning.

*At daybreak, the elders of the people, the chief priests, and the scribes assembled again. Once they had brought him before their council, they said, "Tell us, are you the Messiah?" He replied, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I question you, you will not answer. This much only will I say: 'From now on, the Son of Man will have his seat at the right hand of the Power of God'" "So you are the Son of God?" they asked in chorus. He answered, "It is you who say I am." They said, "What need have we of witnesses? We have heard it from his own mouth."*

*Lk. 22:66-71*

The Scriptures make it clear that Jesus dies because He admits to being both the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God, under oath before the high court of Israel. These men who represent Israel are hardened against any evidence to support the claims made by Jesus. They know such evidence exists. As Peter later preaches:

*....Jesus the Nazorean was a man whom God sent to you with miracles, wonders, and signs as his credentials. These God worked through him in your midst as you well know.*

*Acts 2:22*

The people themselves witnessed to what these miracles and wonders proclaimed: "...They kept saying. 'When the Messiah comes, can he be expected to perform more signs than this man (Jn. 7:31)?'" Jesus called upon His "works" as a witness to God's testimony to His claims:

*If I do not perform my Father's works, put no faith in me. But if I do perform them, even though you put no faith in me, put faith in these works, so as to realize what it means that the Father is in me and I in him.*

*Jn. 10:37-38*

John the evangelist makes it clear that Jesus' claim to be the son of God is understood by the Jews to mean more than the traditional use of that title. The kings of Israel are referred to as the "sons of God." John writes:

*The reason why the Jews were even more determined to kill him was that he not only was breaking the Sabbath but, worse still, was speaking of God as his own Father, thereby making himself God's equal.* Jn. 5:18

When the Jews accused Jesus before Pilate they said:

*"We have our law," the Jews responded, "and according to that law he must die because he made himself God's Son."* Jn. 19:7

We behold here what Jesus refers to as "*hardness of heart.*" This involves a deep down, willed decision not to accept Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. They will to be unmoved by the evidence. The mind controls the human personality, and it possesses the ability to block out any and all evidence that militates against what it has willed to believe and refuses to accept. What occurs in the deepest recesses of the heart causes the person to unconsciously become spiritually blinded to truth, and to consciously oppose it as error. The Jews stated it well in the discourse on the "*bread of life,*" "*This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously (Jn. 6:60)?*" Interestingly, at this time John has Jesus say, "*Did I not choose the Twelve of you myself? Yet one of you is a devil (Jn. 6:70).*"

In the case of the high priests and the elders, we are dealing with men of little religious faith. The death of Jesus was for them a matter of political expediency; He threatened their status quo. John had earlier recorded:

*...the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we to do," they said, "with this man performing all sorts of signs? If we let him go on like this, the whole world will believe in him. Then the Romans will come in and sweep away our sanctuary and our nation." One of their numbers named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, addressed them at this point: "You have no understanding whatever! Can you not see that it is better for you to have one man die [for the people] than to have the whole nation destroyed?" He did not say this on his own. It was rather as high priest for that year that he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation--and not for this nation only, but to gather into one all the dispersed children of God.*

*Jn. 11:47-52*

The Pharisees were men of faith, but pride poisoned their spirits and rendered them spiritually blind. They rejected the grace of repentance which would have reduced them to "*little ones*," capable of receiving the kingdom of God into their hearts. The Sadducees were probably incapable of considering seriously anyone's claim to be the Messiah. The Pharisees, on the other hand, could only accept one as the Messiah who appeared in keeping with their preconceived notions. They refused to believe that God could be other than as they perceived Him. When He did appear so in His Son, they despised what they beheld and rejected Him. Pride led them to reject the Messiah, the Son of God. "*Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled... (Mt. 23:12).*"

The Scriptures clearly reveal that the Jewish People, represented by their leaders, refused to accept God's witness to Jesus' being the Divinely appointed Messiah. They not only rejected Him, but as Peter later pointed out to them: "*...You even made use of pagans to crucify and kill him (Acts 2:23).*"

The Jews had great concern for the purity of the temple, that it should not be desecrated by the pagans nor defiled by unbelievers. However, they did not hesitate to hand Jesus over to be desecrated and destroyed at their hands. Jesus taught the Jews that in Him they possessed "*something greater than the temple here (Mt. 12:6).*" What the Jews instigated and willfully permitted to happen to Jesus at the hands of the Gentiles became a prophetic symbol of the fate of their own beloved temple. God would hand that very Temple over to the Gentiles to be desecrated and destroyed.

For the Sanhedrin to execute its sentence of death against Jesus, it needed the approbation of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. The chief priests probably intended to place the blame for the death of Jesus upon the Romans. They connived at this by accusing Jesus, before Pilate, of crimes against the Roman government--of inciting rebellion against Rome, encouraging the non-payment of taxes, and declaring Himself to be a king.

It has been suggested that Rome had a larger part in the Passion of Jesus than was depicted on the surface of the gospel accounts. When the Gospels were written, the Church was seeking to survive within the Roman Empire. If the Romans played a larger part in the Passion of Jesus than depicted by the evangelists, it may be that the evangelists failed to record it, due to a prudent silence upon their part. They knew the major

responsibility lay with the Jewish leaders, and they placed the responsibility there. They may have considered it expedient not to emphasize the part of the Romans in the preliminaries that led up to the arrest and death of Jesus.

However, the evangelists may have left behind a subtle clue to a larger participation by the Romans. Only the Roman soldiers could have legally born the sword. We are informed that the arresting party arrived "...armed with swords and clubs (Mt. 26:55)." This would indicate the presence of Roman soldiers in the arresting party, and would imply the consent of the Roman procurator. It may be assumed that, in their intrigue against Jesus, the high priests and elders had covered all bases, which included the procurator. It is possible that Pilate preferred to have Jesus under protective custody during the feast of the Passover. This would not have implied that he desired His death as the Jews did. No doubt both the Jews and Pilate had their own game to play and neither party played with a "full deck of cards."

### THE END OF JUDAS

Matthew desires to bring the Judas affair to completion previous to the trial of Jesus before Pilate. Judas will become forever the symbol of the reprobate in the Christian Church. He will become the disciple who fell from grace, lost faith in Jesus Christ, and turned traitor. He becomes a symbol of those who have failed to be saved despite the mission and love of Jesus: "...Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. Better for him if he had never been born (Mt. 26:24)." The evangelist John intimated that Judas loved money, and had become a thief. Apparently, this led to his being alienated from Christ:

*No man can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other or be attentive to one and despise the other. You cannot give yourself to God and money.*

*Mt. 6:24*

This weakness of Judas opened him up to the temptation and power of Satan. Once Satan possessed Judas he used him to destroy Jesus. Then Satan used Judas' own deed to destroy him. It is his Satan's nature to murder and destroy. Satan fully empowered Judas to carry out his evil design, and then abandoned him to face the remorse of conscience and the despair of spirit that led to self-death. Judas embarked on this course

of death the day he turned away from faith in Jesus Christ--the Way, the Truth, and Life. Matthew relates the end of Judas:

*Then Judas, who had handed him over, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, began to regret his action deeply. He took the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders and said, "I did wrong to deliver up an innocent man!" They retorted, "What is that to us? It is your affair!" So Judas flung the money into the temple and left. He went off and hanged himself.*

*Mt. 27:3-5*

Our personal sins are our own responsibility and we must bear the full effect of them upon our own personal life. Sin is something we do that cannot be undone. We must live with the effects of our mistakes; Judas could not go on living with his. The actions of Judas recall the words of the Lord in Zechariah:

*...And they counted out my wages, thirty pieces of silver. But the Lord said to me, "Throw it in the treasury, the handsome price at which they valued me." So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the treasury in the house of the Lord. Zec. 11:12-13*

Matthew relates:

*The chief priests picked up the silver, observing, "It is not right to deposit this in the temple treasury since it is blood money." After consultation, they used it to buy a potter's field as a cemetery for foreigners. That is why that field, even today is called Blood Field ("Akeldama"). On that occasion, what was said through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: They took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of a man with a price on his head, a price set by the Israelites, and they paid it out for the potter's field just as the Lord had commanded me.*

*Mt. 27:6-10*

Matthew relates the results of Judas' betrayal:

*At daybreak all the chief priests and the elders of the people took formal action against Jesus to put him to death. They bound him and led him away to be handed over to the procurator Pilate.*

*Mt. 27:1-2*

## TRIAL BEFORE PILATE

This Pilate served as the Roman procurator of Judea from 26-36 A.D. Indicating the character of the man, Josephus relates that he was relieved of his command by Vitellius, Governor of Syria, for his brutal treatment of the Samaritans. Matthew does not recount a trial before Pilate as much as he explains how the Jews used the Romans to bring about the death of Jesus.

The main point Matthew desires to make in the narration of both trials is to establish the innocence of Jesus before both the Sanhedrin and the Roman Law. His focus was not primarily the guilt of the Jews, nor the degree of Pilate's guilt or innocence. Remember the primary work of judgment is to declare *righteousness*. Only secondarily does it declare guilt and place blame. The point made by all four gospel accounts is that Jesus stands innocent before the law of God and man. He goes to His death as an innocent victim.

Jesus' acknowledgment of being the Messiah before the Sanhedrin is an implicit admission to His being the King of the Jews. In the face of Roman Law, such a claim would be treasonable, and would carry the death penalty. The Jews accuse Jesus of this before Pilate. Pilate immediately begins his interrogation with "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" Jesus responded, '*As you say*' (Mt. 27:11)." Jesus' own answer neither affirms nor denies the accusation.

The Romans were extremely sensitive to insurrection, and dealt harshly with its perpetrators. No doubt Pilate was well informed about Jesus of Nazareth and did not seriously consider this charge. A man in Pilate's position understood well the baser elements in man--political intrigue, ambition, and jealousy. Matthew writes: "*He knew, of course, that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over* (Mt. 27:18)." The influence of Jesus over the people challenged the influence of the Jewish leaders. "*The chief priests, meanwhile, brought many accusations against him* (Mk. 15:3)."

Jesus meets such lies with silent contempt. Pilate cannot help but be impressed with the Person of Jesus. He had spent a lifetime dealing with men and Jesus impressed him. He was determined to release Jesus, but he underestimated the determination of the Jewish leaders.

In prison, the Romans had a "*notorious*" character called Barabbas, "*who had committed murder in the uprising.*" Or, as Luke said, "*This Barabbas*



had been thrown in prison for causing an uprising in the city, and for murder (Lk. 23:19)." Pilate proposed to give the Jews a choice between the two men. Certain older manuscripts refer to Barabbas as "Jesus Barabbas." The name *Barabbas* in Aramaic meant *Son of the Father*. Barabbas symbolized the political messiah who sought to establish the kingdom through violence and murder. He, no doubt, belonged to the party of the Zealots. Jesus once taught the Jews that those who espouse to the murder of others reveal their true son ship and proper paternity. He once said to the Jews:

*If you were Abraham's children, you would be following Abraham's example. The fact is, you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I have heard from God...Were God your father you would love me...The father you spring from is the devil, and willingly you carry out his wishes. He brought death to man from the beginning, and has never based himself on truth; the truth is not in him.* Jn. 8:39-44

Matthew interrupts the flow of the trial narrative and relates:

*While he was still presiding on the bench, his wife sent him a message: "Do not interfere in the case of that holy man. I had a dream about him today which has greatly upset me." Mt. 27:19*

For Matthew the dream is the medium of divine inspiration. As the Jews are being prepared for their decision, the pagan wife of the procurator declares to her husband that Jesus is "*the righteous one.*"

*Meanwhile, the chief priests and elders convinced the crowds that they should ask for Barabbas and have Jesus put to death. So when the procurator asked them, "Which one do you wish me to release for you?" they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what am I to do with Jesus, the so called Messiah?" "Crucify him!" they all cried. He said, "Why, what crime has he committed?" But they only shouted the louder, "Crucify him!" Pilate finally realized that he was making no impression and that a riot was breaking out instead.* Mt. 27:20-24

When Pilate asked about the fate of Jesus, they demanded the brutal and cruel death of crucifixion. When Pilate requested the reason, he received

with great clamor their decision, not their reason. Reasoning had been rejected. They demanded that their wills be done. There was a real danger of a riot. Better the death of one man than many. Pilate preferred peace to justice. However, he surprisingly made the crucifixion their business, not his, in keeping with an ancient Jewish custom described in Chapter Twenty-one of Deuteronomy.

*He called for water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, declaring as he did so, "I am innocent of the blood of this just man. The responsibility is yours." The whole people said in reply, "Let his blood be on us and our children." At that, he released Barabbas to them. Jesus, however, he first had scourged; then he handed him over to be crucified.* Mt. 27:24b-26

### THE MOCKED KING

Choosing Barabbas over Jesus has been viewed by many as the moment of Israel's public apostasy. The evangelist John dramatized this even more powerfully when he recorded the Jews as saying, "*We have no king but Caesar (Jn. 19:15).*" In the mind of John they repudiated Yahweh with these words. According to the presentation of Matthew, the Jews rejected the savior sent by God, and chose to go the way of the Jewish Zealots, opting for their political messiah who would eventually lead not to life and liberty, but to death and destruction.

The price for accepting the responsibility for the death of Jesus—"*Let his blood be on us*"--has been recorded by many to be the destruction of the temple, the city of Jerusalem, and the Jewish Nation. Nevertheless, it becomes clear in the narration that Jesus died in the place of the sinner. Jesus died that the sinner might live. John the Baptist said of Jesus: "*Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29)!*" Isaiah foretold:

*...Through his sufferings, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear...Because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; And he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.* Is. 53:11-12

Death by crucifixion was a slow lingering process in which the victim died of exposure and suffocation. The Romans regularly scourged those

sentenced to the death of crucifixion with the intention of hastening the death on the cross. After being condemned to death, Jesus was turned over to the soldiers to be scourged. The soldiers of the high priests had ridiculed Jesus for being the prophet. Now the Roman soldiers ridicule Jesus for being the King of the Jews. The image of Caesar appeared on the Roman coin with a radiant circlet around his head and scepter within his hand. In mock imitation of Caesar, the Roman soldiers adorn and ridicule Jesus:

*They stripped off his clothes and wrapped him in a scarlet military cloak. Weaving a crown out of thorns they fixed it on his head, and stuck a reed in his right hand. Then they began to mock him by dropping to their knees before him, saying, "All hail, king of the Jews!" They also spat at him. Afterward they took hold of the reed and kept striking him on the head. Finally, when they had finished making a fool of him, they stripped him of the cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him off to crucifixion.*

*Mt. 27:28-31*

It is indeed the hour of darkness in which the Prince of Darkness rules. Jesus experiences upon His Person the full effect of the evil that flows from the sinful, corrupted human spirit. He becomes the object and helpless victim of its sickness and malice. It is a frightful scene that reveals, unmasked, the ugly face of sin. Yet despite the horror of it all, Matthew does not wish his readers to miss the prophetic symbolism hidden within this mocking, cruel ritual. The Jews have rejected Jesus as their King. The Romans, in their contempt for the Jews, treat their Messiah as a "fool-king." Precisely because of what He suffers, Jesus will become not only the King of the Jews, but of the Gentiles, who now offer him mock adoration. They will come to adore him as Christ the King.

## THE CRUCIFIXION

The place of crucifixion, called Golgotha or Calvary, lay just beyond the walls of the city. The journey from the praetorium, the place of judgment, to the place of execution was a short distance. However, Jesus was already in such a weakened condition, that the guards, fearing He would die along the way, "pressed into service" a passerby "a Cyrenian named Simon," and forced him to carry the cross behind Jesus. This would have been the transverse bar of the cross. The vertical pole would have already been firmly fixed in the earth at Calvary. Simon became the reluctant symbol of the disciple taking up the

cross and following the footsteps of Jesus. We note, from the account given by Mark, that Simon's two sons, Alexander and Rufus, were known to Mark and the Christian community in Rome.

Originally, crucifixion was a Persian form of punishment adopted by the Romans for the execution of slaves, rebels, and bandits. Matthew does not dwell upon the act of crucifixion, nor the terrible agony entailed. He simply relates these simple details:

*When they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among them by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Above his head they had put the charge against him in writing: "THIS IS KING OF THE JEWS." Two insurgents were crucified along with him, one at his right and one at his left. Mt. 27:35-38*

For the Messiah of Israel to die this horrible, disgraceful death was indeed a difficult reality for the disciples to comprehend. The enemies of Jesus considered it proof that He was a false messiah. As Paul would write, "*Christ crucified--a stumbling block to Jews, and an absurdity to Gentiles (I Cor. 1:23).*" We read in Deuteronomy, "*God's curse rests on him who hangs on a tree (Deut. 21:23).*" The body of such was defilement upon the land. The law insisted, "*It shall not remain on the tree overnight. You shall bury it the same day (Deut. 21:23a).*"

*Only when the Church could see the death of Jesus in the light of God's Will and as a fulfillment of the Scriptures did it behold the hidden glory of Jesus revealed beneath the shame and ugliness of crucifixion. Then the Cross became the sign of victory and exaltation of Jesus--His ascending to the Father. Jesus had humbled Himself to accept death as the Will of God—even death, death on a cross. Phil. 2:8*

The evangelist Matthew beholds the crucifixion of Jesus as the literal fulfillment of Psalm 22. It is this Psalm that gives meaning and significance to Jesus' death upon the cross. The 22nd Psalm begins:

*(Eli, Eli, lemma sabachthani?) My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, far from my prayer, from the words of my cry? O my God, I cry out by day, and you answer not; by night, and there is no relief for me.*

It is a prayer of a soul in suffering but not in despair. The suppliant continues:

*Yet you are enthroned in the holy place, O glory of Israel! In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and they escaped; in you they trusted, and they were not put to shame. But I am a worm, not a man; the scorn of men, despised by the people. All who see me scoff at me; they mock me with parted lips, they wag their heads: 'He relied on the Lord, let him deliver him, let him rescue him, if he loves him.' You have been my guide since I was first formed, my security at my mother's breast. To you I was committed at birth, from my mother's womb you are my God.*

*Be not far from me, for I am in distress; be near, for I have no one to help me. Many bullocks surround me; the strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. They open their mouths against me like ravening and roaring lions.*

*I am like water poured out; all my bones are racked. My heart has become like wax melting away within my bosom. My throat is dried up like baked clay; my tongue cleaves to my jaws; to the dust of death you have brought me down.*

*Indeed, many dogs surround me, a pack of evildoers closes in upon me; they have pierced my hands and my feet; I can count all my bones. They look on and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots.*

*But you, O Lord, be not far from me; O my help, hasten to aid me. Rescue my soul from the sword, my loneliness from the grip of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth; from the horns of the wild bulls, my wretched life.*

The suppliant does not lose faith and confidence amidst all these afflictions. He goes on to proclaim:

*I will proclaim your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise you...For he has not spurned nor disdained the wretched man in his misery, Nor did he turn his face away from*

*him, but when he cried out to him, he heard him. So by your gift will I utter praise in the vast assembly....All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; all the families of the nations shall bow down before him. ...And to him my soul shall live; my descendants shall serve him. Let the coming generation be told of the Lord that they may proclaim to a people yet to be born the justice he has shown.*

*Ps. 22:1ff*

Again the Church saw in the Book of Wisdom the image of Jesus in the “just one.” There the wicked say:

*Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training. He professes to have knowledge of God and styles himself a child of the Lord....He calls blest the destiny of the just and boasts that God is his Father. Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him. For if the just one be the son of God, he will defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes. With revilement and torture let us put him to the test that we may have proof of his gentleness and try his patience. Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him.*

*Wis. 2:12-20*

It is in the light of this Old Testament background that Matthew wishes the crucifixion of Jesus to be seen. Matthew goes on to narrate:

*People going by kept insulting him, tossing their heads and saying: “So you are the one who was going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days! Save yourself, why don't you? Come down off the cross if you are God's Son!” The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders also joined in the jeering: “He saved others but he cannot save himself! So he is the king of Israel! Let's see him come down from that cross and then we will believe in him.” (These men offer Jesus his last temptation and their voices echo the words Satan spoke long ago to Jesus.) “He relied on God; let God rescue him now if he wants to. After all, he claimed, ‘I am God's Son.’” The insurgents who had been crucified with him kept taunting him in the same way. From noon onward, there was darkness over the whole land until mid-afternoon.*

*Mt. 27:39-45*

Biblically, such darkness signified that the Presence of God and His power were about to be demonstrated upon the earth, as in Exodus 10:22. In Amos such darkness signified the end of a world. (See Am. 8:9.) Then toward mid-afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud tone:

*“Eli, Eli, lemma sabachthani?”, that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This made some of the bystanders who heard it remark, “He is invoking Elijah!” Immediately one of them ran off and got a sponge. He soaked it in cheap wine, and sticking it on a reed, tried to make him drink. Meanwhile the rest said, “Leave him alone, Let’s see whether Elijah comes to his rescue.” Once again Jesus cried out in a loud voice, and then gave up his spirit.*

*Mt. 27:46-50*

Jesus triumphed over the full force of evil--the full evil effect of sin upon mankind. Jesus’ triumph consisted in not swerving amidst it all one millimeter from the Will of God. Though the diabolical storm that whirled around Him destroyed His physical life, it touched not His spirit. He continued in absolute confidence, faith, and love in God as His heavenly Father. He breathed forth His soul with childlike confidence—*“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Lk. 23:46).”*

Never for a moment did He withdraw an ounce of compassionate love for those who so cruelly despised and rejected Him. As He most painfully experienced, in body and soul, the full effect of evil in mankind, he prayed for all sinners, *“Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing (Lk. 23:34).”* Indeed, He was the Son of God. For the Scriptures have said:

*Love your enemy and do good...Then will your recompense be great. You will rightly be called sons of the Most High, since he himself is good to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate. Lk. 6:35-36*

## THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF JESUS

When Matthew writes, *“Once again Jesus cried out in a loud voice, and then gave up his spirit (Mt. 27:50),”* he does not imply death has occurred, but that new life has issued forth from the dying body of Jesus. Man’s relationship with God will never be the same. The old is passing away and all shall be made new. Death has been conquered and the dead shall rise to

newness of life. The Church veritably rises out of the dead body of Christ--filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. The prophecy of Ezekiel has been fulfilled:

*Thus says the Lord God: "O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live..."*  
Ezek. 37:12-14

These truths Matthew expresses in the apocalyptic scenes that follow the death of Jesus. He records:

*Suddenly the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, boulders split, tombs opened. Many bodies of saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After Jesus' resurrection they came forth from their tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. The centurion and his men who were keeping watch over Jesus were terror-stricken at seeing the earthquake and all that was happening, and said, "Clearly this was the Son of God!"*  
Mt. 27:51-54

Matthew teaches here that a world has ended, and the beginning of the Final Age has begun. The conversion of the soldiers signifies that the faith of the Jews has passed to the Gentiles.

## THE LORD OF GLORY

Matthew relates that certain women who had followed Jesus from Galilee witnessed the death and burial of Jesus. He named three of them, "*Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James and Joseph, and the Mother of Zebedee's sons (Mt. 27:56).*" Since the apostles all fled, these women became the official witnesses to the fact that Jesus had truly died and been buried. They likewise became the first witnesses to the empty tomb.

There was a law that a criminal must lie in a criminal's grave for one year, and then the body could be returned to the family. Jesus was spared this by the influence of a wealthy disciple, Joseph of Arimathea (Arimathea is identified with the modern Rentis, lying about 20 miles



northeast of Jerusalem). This Joseph, we know from other sources, was a member of the Sanhedrin. Joseph requested the body of Jesus from Pilate. When Pilate ascertained from the centurion that Jesus had already died, he issued the order to relinquish the body of Jesus to Joseph. Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it in fresh linen and laid it in "*his own new tomb which had been hewn from a formation of rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance of the tomb and went away (Mt. 26:60).*"

Matthew tells us however, that "*Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb (Mt. 27:61).*" They alone remained to mourn the death of Jesus.

We are told that on the following day, the chief priests went to Pilate and requested a guard for the tomb. They recalled that Jesus made a promise to rise from the dead on the third day. They feared the disciples of Jesus would come and steal the body and claim He rose from the dead:

*This final imposture would be worse than the first. Pilate told them, "You have a guard. Go and secure the tomb as best you*

*can." So they went and kept it under surveillance of the guard, after fixing a seal to the stone. Mt. 27:65-66*

Behind this episode, some see a reflection of the Church's battle with the Jews over the resurrection of Jesus. It has been observed they are in agreement on one point--the tomb was empty on the third day--the first day of the week.

The Scriptures mention no eye-witnesses to the rising of Jesus from the dead. Both the disciples of Jesus and His enemies testify to the fact of the empty tomb. The Scriptures mention many witnesses to "after the fact"--many witnesses to the fact that Jesus Crucified had risen from the dead. One of the earliest accounts is given by Paul written in a letter to the Corinthians about twenty years "after the fact." Paul recounts for the Corinthians the tradition living within the Church:

*I handed on to you first of all what I myself received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried, in accordance with the Scriptures, rose on the third day; that he was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve. After that he was*

*seen by five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still alive, although some have fallen asleep. Next he was seen by James; then by all the apostles. Last of all he was seen by me, as one born out of the normal course.*

*1 Cor. 15:3-8*

Paul makes no mention of the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene and her companions, whom the Gospel mentions as the first witnesses to the Resurrection. This omission may reflect the fact that Paul was, in his own words, a Pharisee of Pharisees. For them the testimony of women was not considered valid nor admissible in a court of inquiry. We do see from the other accounts in the gospel narratives that the women were not believed. Paul's mention of the five hundred witnesses may be a reference to the appearance of Jesus in Galilee that is recorded by Matthew.

According to our gospel account, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrived early on the first day of the week *"to inspect the tomb."* Others report they came to anoint the body of Jesus. When they arrived at the tomb—

*Suddenly there was a mighty earthquake, as the angel of the Lord ascended from heaven. He came to the stone, rolled it back, and*

*sat on it. In appearance he resembled a flash of lightning while his garments were as dazzling as snow.*

*Mt. 28:2-3*

This entire scene with the appearance of the *"angel of the Lord"* signifies that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the work of God, symbolized in the angel of the Lord. The rolling back of the stone from the tomb, and the angel sitting upon it, signifies the Lord's conquest and triumph over death. Such a manifestation of Divine power and glory upon earth profoundly affected human beings:

*The guards grew paralyzed with fear of him and fell down like dead men. Then the angel spoke, addressing the women: "Do not be frightened. I know you are looking for Jesus the crucified, but he is not here. He has been raised, exactly as he promised. Come and see the place where he was laid. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has been raised from the dead and now goes ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him.' That is the message I have for you."*

*Mt. 28:4-7*

These women have become the first recipients of the "*tidings of great joy*"-- Jesus has risen from the dead! We see immediately the news is not merely for their enjoyment; it commissions them to become apostles of the resurrection--apostles to the apostles. They accept their mission with a mixture of joy and fear; they "*ran to carry the good news to his disciples (Mt. 28:8).*" However:

*Suddenly, without warning, Jesus stood before them and said, "Peace!" The women came up and embraced his feet and did him homage. At this Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid! Go and carry the news to my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, where they will see me."* Mt. 28:9-10

This manifestation of Jesus verifies the mission of the angel, but also, this experience verifies the fact of the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus from the grave--they "*embraced his feet.*" It likewise makes clear that their old relationship with Jesus has ended. He has now become a proper object of human worship and adoration. As Paul wrote to the Romans:

*The gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh but was made Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.* Rm. 1:3-4

This is not to imply that Jesus was not the Son of God before the resurrection, but that since the resurrection, the human nature of the Son of Man now shares in the Divinity of the Son of God, in a new, irrevocable manner. It is now a proper object of human adoration.

Nevertheless--Jesus cuts short the time of adoration in favor of their apostolic mission. He sends them immediately to those still in ignorance of Him, still in the darkness of doubt and disbelief. He grants them vision, not for the fulfillment of their personal spiritual needs, but to make them zealous missionaries of the Risen Lord: "*Go and carry the news to my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, where they will see me.*"

"*To my brothers*" means much more than it first appears. These were the men who had abandoned and disowned their discipleship. They had broken away from Jesus. The women are to carry to them the good news of absolution--of the forgiveness of their sins. The Risen Savior calls them

*“Brothers”*--they are reinstated into the family of God. On the night of betrayal Jesus told the disciples:

*Tonight your faith in me will be shaken, for Scripture has it: “I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be dispersed.” But after I am raised up, I will go to Galilee ahead of you.*

*Mt. 26:31-32*

The women are to announce the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Between the message of Good News to the Brothers and the final commissioning of the apostles, Matthew inserts the incident of the guards reporting the scene at the tomb to the chief priests. The chief priests bribe the guards to lie and spread the story, *“His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were asleep (Mt. 28:13).”* Matthew comments: *“This is the story that circulates among the Jews to this very day (Mt. 28:15).”*

This incident is intended to teach that along with the spreading of *“the Good News,”* there will always be evil and unbelieving people in this world, who actively impede the spreading of the Gospel, and vilify it. The conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel makes crystal clear what a disciple must do in the world in light of his faith in the Risen Lord.

The climactic moment toward which the life of Jesus had been directed in this Gospel account is reached upon a mountain in Galilee. Galilee will truly become the *“Galilee of the Gentiles.”* For Matthew, the mountain is a holy place upon which God meets and speaks to mankind.

The final scene of the Gospel centers upon the final commissioning of the apostles by the Risen Lord. Matthew pointedly notes only *“eleven”* remain. A prudent reminder that at the beginning of the church there have already been losses in discipleship, and there will be more losses. The disciples who hope to persevere must not forget--not for a day--the words of Jesus:

*Be on guard, and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but nature is weak.*

*Mt. 26:41*

Matthew mentions that some arrive upon the mountain in a state of doubt and uncertainty. This is dissipated by the sight of the Risen Savior. They see and they believe. Matthew relates:

*The eleven disciples made their way to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had summoned them. At the sight of Him, those who had entertained doubts fell down in homage. Jesus came forward and addressed them in these words: "Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name 'of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world!"* Mt. 28:16-20

With this commission the Church comes to life. The New Covenant established in the Blood of Jesus becomes authorized to offer salvation to all mankind. Five profound religious truths are proclaimed in this proclamation.

First: Jesus who possessed power always as the Son of Man has, by His Resurrection, become the cosmic power of the universe. All power in heaven and earth rests in His hands.

Second: in the fullness of this power and authority, Jesus commissioned His Apostles to make disciples of all people--God desires the salvation of all--that all men come to faith and holiness. Jesus commands: "*Go!—make disciples of all the nations.*"

Third: those who believe and profess faith in Jesus are to be incorporated into the very life of the Triune God.

Fourth: the Apostles are commissioned "*to teach.*" Before, they had been empowered "*to heal*" and "*to proclaim.*" Now they know and understand what it truly and fully means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Now they are qualified to teach. As qualified teachers they are commissioned to teach—"everything I have commanded you." The true Church of Jesus Christ must possess and proclaim the fullness of Christian Truth in the world. It must proclaim "*Jesus Christ is Lord,*" but it must also preach "*Jesus Christ Crucified.*"

Fifth and final: Matthew speaks of no ascension but teaches that Jesus remains "*ever present*" in the Church: "*I am with you always.*" What does that reveal to every disciple of Jesus but that He is present in all the situations of life. He who said the fullness of power is His, is present. What

does that mean personally to a disciple? It means what His faith will let it mean. It means that Jesus Christ, if called upon with faith in His Lordship, can and will express His power in every life situation in which a disciple may be found. However, that power is essentially love, and must always be expressed in a way of love.

No one has expressed the full meaning of Christian Discipleship better than Paul when he wrote:

*But those things I used to consider gain I have now reappraised as loss in the light of Christ. I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. For his sake I have forfeited everything; I have accounted all else rubbish so that Christ may be my wealth and I may be in him, not having any justice of my own...The justice I possess is that which comes through faith in Christ. It has its origin in God and is based on faith. I wish to know how to share in his sufferings by being formed into the pattern of his life. Thus do I hope that I may arrive at resurrection from the dead—Brothers, I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line. I give no thought to what lies behind but push on to what is ahead. My entire attention is on the finish line as I run toward the prize to which God calls me—life, on high in Christ Jesus. All of us who are spiritually mature must have this attitude...It is important that we continue on our course, no matter what stage we have reached. Phil. 3:7-16*

*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world.*

*Mt. 28:19,20*

**PRAISE BE JESUS CHRIST!**

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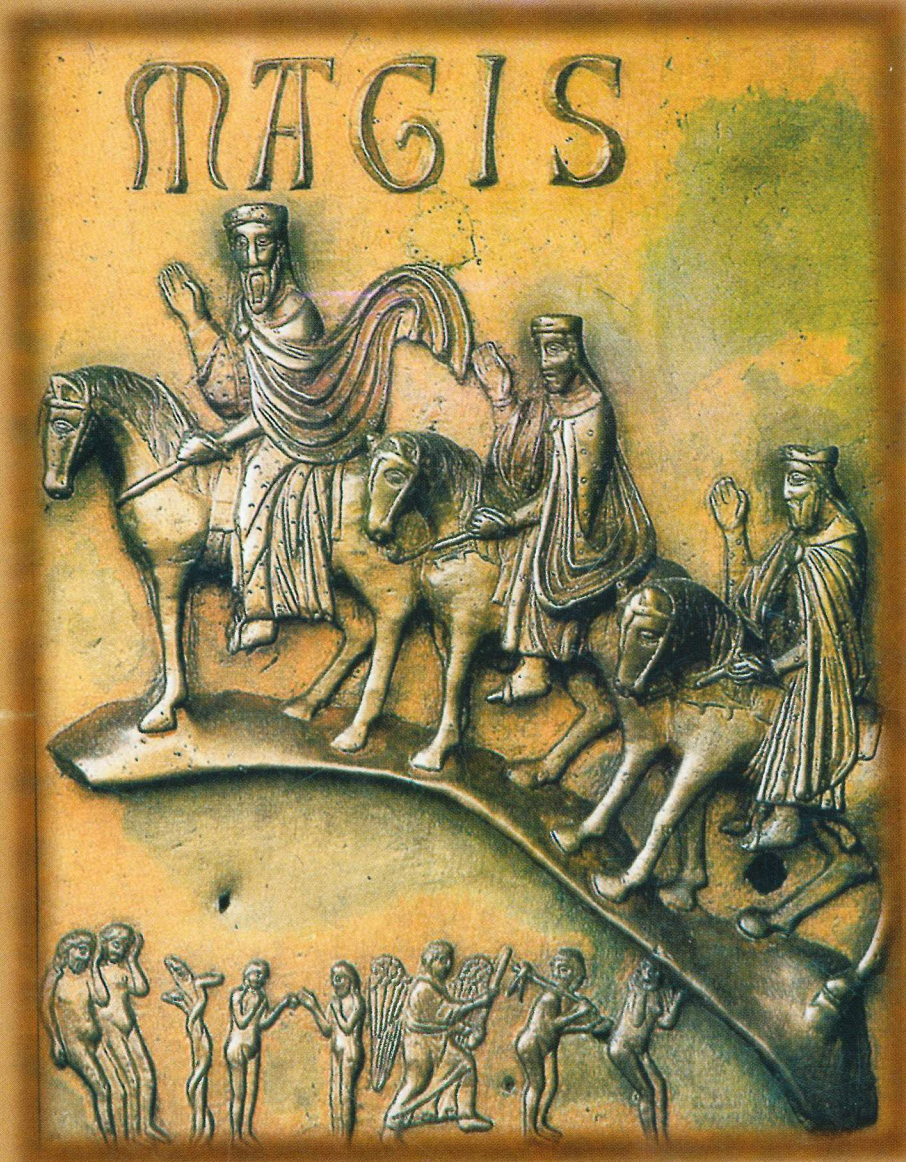
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