

George Philip Bible Readings

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Gospel According to St. Matthew.

1:1-17

The first of the four records of the life of Jesus portrays Him as the Messiah, the expected King of the Jews. It abounds in references to the Old Testament and shows the fulfilment of these prophecies to be in Jesus. It is natural that Matthew (Levi the Jew) should begin his story by tracing the lineage of Jesus back through David to Abraham, the father of the Jews. The list of names traces down through the passing generations the fact that God had not forgotten His promise to send a Saviour. Time and again men's hearts failed, but the promise was renewed and in the fulness of time God sent forth His Son born of a Hebrew maid, Mary, whose husband was Joseph, also a Jew. Remembering that Levi had been the outcast tax-gatherer (Lk.5:27-32) there must have been strong comfort for him in recognising in this list of names some who were in their time broken vessels and failures. Think of but three, Tamar (Gen.38), Rahab (Josh.2), and David (2 Sam.11). Of their sin there was no question, but yet by the grace of God they are found in the succession that leads to Jesus. It is little wonder He was called the friend of sinners. When a man falls his fellow men tend to keep him down and never let him forget; but this Jesus lifts him up again and gives him hope. But to be such a Saviour He had to come down right into the heart of the world of sin. What a condescension; what a Saviour; what a wonder, Jesus, right down beside you.

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1:18-25

It is strange but profitable to be reading this story well away from Christmas. But we are not all that far from Christmas; we never are. With chaste simplicity the earthly and heavenly, the physical and spiritual facts are recounted. It is the story of a miracle and can neither be explained nor explained away. The spiritual message of these words was mighty to a Jew. Immanuel, God with us. That is word with which to face your day. The deepest crisis loses its dread if it is true that God really is with us. He shall save His people from their sins. Find a man with a load on his conscience, a man broken from his moorings, a man gripped by sin and seared by lust and tell him this: Jesus saves. His was a human name, and His life tasted all the sorrows of humanity (Heb.4:14-16). The circumstances of His birth made Him an outcast from the start. No wonder the sinners gathered to Him. His was a human spirituality. How much more there is here. Joseph was a gentleman, with faith, and grace and love. How kind he was to Mary. Mary had Elizabeth to confide in, but Joseph had no man to tell. How could he? To such a man God committed the safe keeping of His Holy Son. What a privilege. Oh to be like Joseph, full of care and courage.

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2:1-10.

It was the outsiders who started all the commotion. They came a distance at great discomfort and cost to seek for this Jesus who had come. The worldly power of Herod was too busy keeping his position safe, to say nothing of other things. The ecclesiastical powers of Israel were simply not interested although they knew all the references in the Old Testament. In Herod's court they still took their place as the religious leaders of the nation, but they had no interest in the mightiest thing God had ever done. Their whole religion was so much a thing of form that they never thought God would really do something significant in their day. But He did, and still does, and will yet do many things prophesied but ignored. And who may then abide the day of His coming? Herod wanted Jesus out of the way for He was inconvenient. But Jesus was there to stay in spite of all his double-dyed scheming lightly cloaked by nice words. Always watch folk who are too nice, to your face, that is! The chief priests were little better, but since they had more knowledge their judgment is greater. It was the outsiders who made the grade, who were spoken to by God and were led to the Babe. They were the pillars of the Kirk. cf. Mt.8:11-12 and Luke 13: 24-30. A saying in the past was, " the nearer the Kirk the further from grace." How terrible. How true.

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2:11-15

Two wonders are here. The faith and insight of these men, and the sure ordering and organising by God. Joseph must have lived close to God to be so constantly in touch with Him, but that is not to be wondered at more than his quiet instant obedience. The wise men could not have had much instruction in the things of God, but like many babes in Christ they far outstripped the privileged Jews and evidenced a knowledge of Christ and desire for Christ that is a deep challenge. They came prepared with costly gifts for they had no thoughts of failure to find the Child. God would not have put it into their hearts only to disappoint them. And God Himself, watching over every move, did not spare the child earthly danger but preserved him in the heart of it all. No alien hand could touch this work of God. God saw to that, and the men who tried to harm and kill eventually died. But God does not die. Nor is He dead now. That is a thought to ponder, for a long time. I wonder what God is thinking about our present situation. Yes, I wonder!

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2:16-23

Have you noticed how often we are reading words that affirm that these events were in fact fulfilling prophecies recorded in the Old Testament? When God says a thing it most surely comes to pass, no matter how long it is delayed. The passing of time is not vexatious to God as it so often is to us. He has plenty of time, and often He is content to delay so that evil might expose itself as it develops and be brought to a complete judgment. Evil works by fear and threats and is resisted by such as the wise men who were not taken in by Herod's specious religious flattery. Evil has its day, and does its dark work here in the vengeful slaying of innocent children. Evil cares not who gets hurt as long as it has its sway. But in due season Herod's little life was snuffed out and he went to face the judgment of eternity, while God instructed His faithful servant Joseph concerning the next stage of the work. What stage was that? The mighty Saviour of God's people was taken into the obscurity of Nazareth (can any good thing come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46). There He remained for thirty years until He emerged fully prepared to do His perfect work in the space of three years. God's ways are not ours and His measurements are not by this world's standards. But His ways work, and He knows how much preparation we need. Do you?

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3:1-6

God is always saying the same thing to an immoral world and degenerate church. Repent! That word tells us we are not right and commands us not only to be sorry for our sins but to be sorry enough to stop, to change our way of thinking and living, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Of course it was at hand. The King Himself was right at their door; and when He came with His rightful claim on their lives they slammed the door in His face and murdered Him. There is little doubt as to the treatment Jesus would get in our Churches today. He would challenge so many things, and cast out so much that is a disgrace to His Father's house that He would have to be got rid of. You believe in God? You pray that He will come and do a work in your life, home, Church, nation? Then prepare the way of the Lord. John's word was stern and compelling and was carried out first in his own life. We say that congregations will not stand for this kind of preaching nowadays. They must, and bow their hearts to it as they did here, confessing how wrong they had been, and turning to God in repentance. This is the ministry God honours, and it makes or breaks the hearers.

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3:7-12

John was wise enough to know that all who were drawn by his ministry were not necessarily real in their response. Enthusiasm is not enough. A new ministry, especially if it has some life about it, will always cause a stir. We have seen that in our own situation. But how long will it last? How much real change will it work in the religious and moral lives of the hearers? That is the test. It is no use saying, "We have Abraham as our father"; or "We have always been associated with this congregation"; or "We have always done this, that and the next

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thing". Bring forth fruit in your life to prove that God really means something to you in your life. Prove by the way that you live that you believe there is a wrath to come. John the Baptist would have been a stern minister but a realistic one, for he recognised that the fire of God by the Holy Ghost burns either to purge and renew the life of repentant sinners long hiding under the garb of hypocritical religion, or to burn and scorch with unquenchable fire those whose hearts remain implacable against the word of the Lord. It is a dividing ministry. It must always be so, just as it was with Jesus. Some came to Him; some did not. (John 1:10-13)

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3:13-17

You can always tell the worth of a person's religion by the place it gives to Jesus, and where there is little real love and affection toward Him (affection is the right word for you cannot love without feelings) you are at variance with God the Father who reveals something of His heart in the last verse (17). Jesus came, and in His baptism (He had no sins to repent of) He took His place with the sinner, was numbered with the transgressor making plain why He had come, and in due season, in the place of the sinners whose side He took, He died on the Cross as God's appointed Lamb of sacrifice. John seems to think it not right that Jesus should thus humble Himself, and die for him. We can well understand his expostulation for it is no easy thing to gaze on the dark and bloody Cross and know that every pang and agony was the price of your sin and pride and weak compromising worldliness. Oh the shame of our cold indifferent hearts! Here is the source of the all-consuming passion of the Baptist. This is what makes a man live and work to please God even though all men hate him for it. He has seen the dying love of Jesus, the Son of God's love, and can never forget it. Have you a heart? Does it feel at all for Jesus? That tells a lot about your religion.

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4:1-11

The story of the temptation can be taken in many ways, but whichever way we consider it, remember it is historical fact, not a parable. The Devil is not a fictional figure, nor a music-hall joke. He is real, and if we try to live a Christian life without reckoning on his presence and activity our downfall will be certain. Here, his attack follows on Jesus setting Himself publicly in His baptism to do the will of God. Already Satan had tried to destroy Jesus through Herod's slaughter of children. Now he tries to deflect Jesus from utter and absolute obedience to God. Later at Caesarea Philippi, through one of Jesus' closest friends he again tried (Matt.16:21-23). Then finally in Gethsemane he tried to destroy Jesus before He could go to the Cross. When we read here that Satan departed for a season (Lk.4:13AV, cf.NIV) we should learn to be very watchful if we would ever be of use to God. The Devil's technique (cf.Eph.6:11) is not one sudden assault soon over. That would be easy to bear. It was a long, protracted, increasing conflict. But Jesus' word was always what it was here, a word of supreme triumph. Get thee hence Satan. The brute was beaten. Everything was in the Devil's favour, the wilderness and the fasting, but each time he came he was dismissed with quiet assurance on the basis of the Word of God. This is the Saviour who dwells in our hearts by faith. There is no need for us to fall.

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4:1-11

Note that in the strategy of spiritual warfare the initiative is always with God. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit to face the enemy in the wilderness. But the conflict did not begin immediately. That long delay would have been the downfall of most of us. But in the waiting period Jesus gave Himself to preparation and when the long awaited assault came He was prepared in mind and spirit by the Word of God and prayer. He had not waited with mooning thoughts irrelevant to his life's work and at every turn He was more than ready. Note that there is no sign at all of hesitation. He had not to wonder what to do next. He knew. He waited each successive advance by the Devil, knowing instinctively that one battle did not end the war, and only when the fight was carried its full length was the defeated foe dismissed. There are many lessons here for the thoughtful Christian. The first assault was on the realm of the physical but legitimate desires. There was no point in tempting Jesus with filth; even the Devil sees the revolting stuff for what it is and would rather have the high than the low. Then Jesus was assailed with the temptation to spiritual presumption, to do a public stunt that would amaze the people and

gather in a crowd, a favourite ploy of the Devil, and a successful one with many. But that kind of crowd does not last and does not produce long-term disciples.

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4:1-11

Lastly, Jesus was offered an alternative to God's way for His life and work. It was to compromise and to come to a working arrangement with Satan and his various methods and activities. Think of the various temptations and learn from them our own vulnerable areas. The first was in terms of human satisfaction and happy circumstances. These are natural desires but can get in the way of our obedience to God. Then the temptation was for "success" that will impress those we regard as important (including ourselves). The final temptation was to use wrong and worldly methods to accomplish spiritual work. Prof. James Denney, in a former day a member of the Divinity faculty of the Free Church College in Glasgow, and made Principal in 1915, entitled a sermon (in the book *The Way Everlasting*) on The Temptation of Jesus, "Wrong roads to the Kingdom". Think about that and ask if you are at the stage of needing to say, "Get thee hence Satan"?

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4:12-17

For his pains and his faithful ministry of God's message and his fearless denunciation of evil inside and outside of the "Kirk", John the Baptist was cast into prison by a man trapped in the web of his own wickedness. John's head was cut off (cf. Mk.6:14-29) but his voice was not silenced for Jesus took up the theme of his message, "Repent for the kingdom is at hand." Then when resentful religious men got rid of Jesus, the apostles took up the refrain and thundered forth the same message of repentance. There is no contradiction between Old Testament, Gospels and Epistles. It is one Word from one God, many a time stern and uncompromising, full of warning as well as the wooing notes of grace and forgiveness. But it is all from the same God of love who gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Nothing but strong words can ever convict of the danger of judgment and awaken to a sense of need. People in darkness and the shadow of death may see great light, but like diseased eyes they shrink from the light and wave it away from them. Men prefer darkness because they think God cannot see in the dark. A grave mistake to make. The reference here from Isaiah 9:2ff. speaks of the justice and judgment of the God who sent a Saviour. Think on these things.

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4:18-22

It is against the background of the temptation and conflict with Satan that Jesus says "Follow Me." From John's account of the Gospel we believe these men had already met Jesus and heard His word. Now having had time to think over the implications they are called to evidence the result of their thoughts and interest by committing themselves to an obvious discipleship. It was not beyond them for they were to be used on the basis of their present profession as fishermen, although the catch was to be different. Their response was immediate and it was disruptive to their way of life and costly in terms of money as well as emotion. Career, capital and family all took second place. They must, of course, because if God who gave us those things sees that His gifts are hindrances He might take them all away to set us free to do what we were created for. Jesus makes it quite clear what they are letting themselves in for, and that is why so often people (especially men) have not the courage to be Christians. Let's face it; it is sheer cowardice that keeps many back. They have not the moral fibre. They are weak, soft, fearful. Is that sufficient excuse? Listen to Jesus, "Follow me, and I will make you." ... Yes, there's the rub. There is no stopping this Jesus when He gets started. He is an enthusiast. Yes, but He makes a man of you.

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4:23-25

What a start to a ministry. How disappointing that there were only twelve at the end, and they all ran away too. I wonder what people said about Jesus and His work as it went on from week to week. He taught and He

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preached and refused to be distracted from that task. But that did not mean it was His only work. Every true ministry of God's Word creates a pastoral ministry of its own. That is why ministers should not have time for the platitudinous visitation that wastes so much time chatting about nothing in particular. There is more vital pastoral work than that. When the Word is preached there is always a gathering of the needy. That is why a real congregation can often be despised by those whose standard of measurement is of this world. Ministers cannot tell of the sore moral, psychological, physical and spiritual problems that find cure in the course of the week by week ministry. But they are there, and it is Jesus who is doing the work of healing. His touch has still its ancient power, as many can testify. There may not now be the surging crowds (Jesus often found them a real nuisance for they seldom discerned His real message), but the work is done and by some unseen power the needy are drawn from far and near. How wonderful to be part of the staff of such a clinic. It makes sense of a lot of things, not least our own problems as we go along.

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5:1-12

Jesus' purpose becomes clearer as He withdraws from the crowd to teach twelve men. What He teaches is not technique, organisation, nor even theology, but the requisite of Christian character in those who would do His work. There is no question that if life and character are right, witness and work will not lack opportunity and result. A man who is by genuine grace a Christian cannot be hid. It is character building that Jesus goes in for and here He gives a lesson on how to be happy. That is all very well for the first nine verses but what sense can we make of v.10-12 in terms of happiness? Are not circumstances like these the contradiction of happiness? Strangely enough, no! Some of the people who have all the things in the world, who can go everywhere they want, and say they lack nothing are the most miserable people on earth. Their whole life is on the surface, how could they be happy? They can't even recognise happiness when they see it. They don't know what it is. It is a person whose name is Jesus and when He is busy moulding your character in the image of this list of graces you find a new quality and category of happiness. Your capacity for it grows and so does your possession of it. It is a miracle. It is just like heaven. It is heaven, for "where Jesus is, 'tis heaven there". The children's hymn that says "If I come to Jesus, happy shall I be" has to be sung with care by adults. But the longer you live, the more you know it is true whatever the immediate circumstances. Even in sadness you just know Jesus is there.

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5:1-12

Better look again at the standard set for the children of the kingdom lest we get self-satisfied. Blessed are the poor who know their need that brings them to God. Blessed are those who are humble enough to mourn what they are and have done. Once you see what you are, you are not so quick to flare up against your brother. That is meekness. Many don't really want to be bad (so they say) but how many hunger to be good? The merciful open their hearts to those who don't deserve it. Pure in heart, or single in heart, is a high standard whichever way you look at it. Peace-makers and not trouble-makers are the children of God. The world does not like folk who grow too much like Jesus because it gives them a bad conscience. If you are persecuted for being true to Jesus, inevitably people will say things that have not a scrap of truth in them and they will grossly exaggerate and distort what is true. That is what they did to Jesus. Does everyone like you? There is something wrong with your Christianity. Are you persecuted? Be sure it is for Jesus' sake and not because of your own bad manners and boorish behaviour. Blessed are you for there is a God and a heaven, and reward is not all postponed until then.

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5:13-16

There is great blessedness or happiness in being a Christian but there is also responsibility and this is a word of very searching challenge. There should be no difficulty in recognising a Christian; not because of the extravagant oddity of their so called witness, (Jesus came to make queer people natural and balanced) but because of the distinctive tang of their lives in secular society. If a man's faith is real it cannot be hidden. He may not be a militant evangelical, but his presence among others will be as salt to restrain the tendency to corruption, and as light to be a guide to people who have altogether lost the way. This you will be. You will not

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have to try to be light. If you have Jesus you will be light. But if the inner quality of your life loses its tang, becoming tasteless and tired, you will be good for nothing. You may try very hard to witness but you are wasting your time. If the inner flame of love that binds you to Christ flickers, the whole of your life will be smoked up like the glass of an oil lamp and far from being a light you will become an offensive smell that gives people a distaste for Jesus. It all depends on what you are at heart. Jesus says that salt that loses its savour cannot be resalted. It has to be thrown out. That is serious.

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5:17-20

Jesus has no time for those who sweep aside the Ten Commandments as if they no longer applied. They do, and not only in terms of outward, polite observance, for the Pharisees did that. Jesus tells us here that our righteousness must exceed theirs if we would enter the kingdom. The law declares God's moral requirements and the Old Testament Prophets called for obedience. Jesus is still speaking here of example, and makes it plain that those who in their own lives break the commandments (think especially of the one concerning the Sabbath or Sunday) are thereby teaching others to do the same and implying that there is no penalty to pay. There is and people will pay it. No matter your claim to be a Christian, if you say and do not, if the law of God and your daily life are two separate compartments, if your church life does not determine your daily life, you are a Pharisee and Jesus says you will not enter the Kingdom. Too high a standard? Never! Jesus died to save from the condemnation of the broken law so that you might have forgiveness. But that is only the negative side. He died to sin and lives again so that by His Spirit dwelling in your heart the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in you (Rom.8:1-4). There is no excuse at all.

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5:21-26

It is all terribly practical and it is Jesus who sets the pace. Anger, contempt, insult (22), what right has any sinner to treat another like that? You say you have cause? Does your cause stand in God's eyes? You are quite sure? Then if you are so genuinely in the right, with no counter accusation from your foe, let the judge of all the earth administer the due retribution (Rom.12:17-19), and guard your own mind lest you allow poisonous thoughts to corrupt your whole judgment. Remember Jesus is speaking to children of the Kingdom, and charges the Christian before he comes to Church or to prayer to make due restitution to the brother who has something against him. Then when you are on speaking terms with your brother come and speak to God. What if *you* have something against the brother? You will suffer no harm by forgiving. It may well be that your approach to him will give the opportunity for reconciliation that should have been accomplished long ago. Grievances nurtured in the heart and nourished with resentment are like the flames of hell. There is no satisfying their lust for revenge. How terrible that Christians should so nurse a grudge and at the same time sit together at the Lord's Table. Is that not a contradiction of communion or fellowship?

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5:27-30

The stringent words of Jesus are very healthy in a society where the whole set-up ministers to the impure, and where even professing Christians are prone to become involved in the shady and suggestive when it is couched in the form of a joke. Impurity is no joke. That society smiles at it or condones it is quite irrelevant. God forbids it. He that looks and thinks has done the deed already for, if he thought he could get off with it, he would scarcely hesitate. Jesus thunders His warning, knowing full well that once the breach is made, however small, the tide will soon batter its way in. Let there be no concession or compromise. If the eye (the things seen and read) causes you to stumble, cut it out. If the hand (company and activity) involves you in danger, cut it off. Cast it from you as you would a blazing coal, for that is exactly what it is, set on fire by hell. Spare a thought for the young folk, and tremble at what might happen to them as they are drawn to the glitter of worldliness. Don't think it can't happen. It has happened before and will again. See that they are at least taught of a living, powerful, satisfying, personal Saviour, and not just to have a mere attachment to a Church that has no power to save and keep.

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5:27-32

All these verses belong together and continue Jesus' probe into the laxity of our moral standards. What we condemn in others we usually contrive to excuse when it comes nearer home. But there are no exceptions. We cannot here discuss fully the question of divorce. You can study for yourselves such passages as Matt. 19: 3-11; Mark 10: 2-12; 1 Cor.7. Suffice it to say that Jesus sets an exceedingly high standard, if in fact divorce is allowed at all. Some of the present-day decisions of the courts are bound to bring their catastrophic harvest. Anything done to mar, spoil, or do despite to the holy bond of marriage is an offence before God. That two people cannot get on together is no justification for divorce and the cause of unrest and the solution must be found within the marriage bond, which bond, once made cannot be unmade despite all the decrees of earth. But what of unhappy Christian marriages? The answer may be that someone has not sought the will of God before taking the step of marriage and that must be acknowledged and grace sought to live with the consequences. Let Christians have and give reasonable assurance that it is the will of God that they should be married and then their union will be a holy thing blessed of God to their united pleasure and service. God makes no mistakes. See that you know His will, for that is deeper guarantee of lasting happiness than your more immediate but less dependable feelings. Keep in mind that two Christians getting married is not necessarily Christian marriage!

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5:33-37

James says the tongue is set on fire of Hell (Jas.3:1-8) and Jesus says that much of our excessive and extravagant speaking comes from the evil one. There are always those who are too sure of themselves and you hear them pronouncing their verdicts. But at best we know only in part and we do well to hold our peace and let our speech be essentially simple, a yes or no, as far as we know at that moment. No oaths should be necessary, for a man should be known to mean what he says and to say what he means. Jesus here lays the axe to all falsity, lies, half-lies, suggestions or vital facts withheld to sway the verdict. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth must be the mark of the child of God. Think of the possibility of a tape recording of all your conversations of the past week being made public. Would it cause you embarrassment? Why? Have you been saying things you ought not to have said? Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt. (Col. 4:6)

Simple speech, honest before God and man, is of far greater value than a spate of holy words that signifies nothing.

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5:38-42

Revenge and retaliation are native and natural to sinful hearts and the law of God was given to forbid and prevent undue extravagance of cruelty parading under the guise of justice. We all know how people try in various ways to claim their pound of flesh many times over and would crucify you a thousand times if they got the chance. When this happens it would be all too easy to let the iron of bitterness enter the soul, but that is to come down to meet evil with evil and only adds to confusion. Jesus says in these personal spheres that we are not to resist evil. Is that too extreme? There are examples in Scripture when Jesus and the Apostles challenged evil as it militated against the work of God. That is different. But are we expected to let people do what they like to us and with us, trampling over us in cruel word and action? Well, Jesus let them do that to Him. When He was reviled He reviled not again (1 Pet.2:21-23 AV). But the negative is not enough. We are not only to refrain from giving way to the dictates of our proud hearts, we are to go the second mile and bless them who persecute us (Rom.12:14-21). Would that we could learn that a soft answer turns away wrath; but grievous words stir up anger (Prov.15:1). It is the way the Master went and He won out in the end. Go and do the same.

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5:43-48

Be perfect even as God is perfect. Isn't the Bible a staggering book! That is how Jesus sums it all up and He would not have said it like that if He had not meant it and if it had been too much for us. When we read a verse like 44, our reaction is to ask, "Why should I?" But there is another question. Why should God love you and give you so many things you don't deserve? Is it because you are nice and kind and lovable? No! It is

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undeserved love and kindness. Now open your heart and start being as kind to sinners as God is who makes the sun to shine on the evil as well as the good. You say it hurts to love because there is no guarantee that love will be returned. God knows a lot about that. But the only alternative is to shut yourself up in a cell of privacy and let no-one have anything but casual, superficial relationships with you. That is a life of barren loneliness. If on the other hand you open your heart and lose yourself in this kind of self-sacrificing love, you will find life. You will be much more human, have far more friends, and be ever so much happier yourself. The cost? Yes it is there. But so is Jesus.

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6:1-4

Jesus now turns His searchlight on our religious life and the first thing He mentions is almsgiving or the collection. Some of those who talk most about their love for their Church give least of all. But the point is that it is not the Church nor people that count, but God. Far too much of our life consists in wondering what people will think. It might surprise and humble us if we realised how little we figured in their thoughts. Proud creatures that we are with our sidelong glances when we are doing good to make sure others are looking. Do it unto God, and having done it, forget it, lest it go to our heads and the last state be worse than the first. In secret, Sunday by Sunday, go quietly to God and say, "here is Your share of my wages". Then lest we think we have done all that is expected consider how much we give of our time, care, energy to His service. Ask ourselves what we do in life that is not really for ourselves. Consider all the good deeds that crossed our minds but got no further; lonely folk to be visited; missionaries to be written to; parents to be helped; gratitude to be expressed. We are going to be busy. Get started!

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6:5-8

A hypocrite is someone who acts a part when an audience is present. Isn't it startling that Jesus uses this illustration in relation to prayer? All that starts by gushing in prayer "dear Lord" and continues with effusive piety, and ending with a loud evangelical Amen is not necessarily prayer. Many elegant prayers are delivered to congregations, who may or may not appreciate them. But are prayers not supposed to be addressed to God, who is far more concerned with reality and earnestness of heart and desire than with grammatical perfection? How we long sometimes that some preachers would get lost in the middle of a sentence, for then, deprived of their toys of alliteration, they might have to show us their hearts. That is exactly what God wants, and of course in prayer you can do that best in private. The bowed head and clasped hands can signify nothing. But again, depending on the heart, which God sees, it can signify the greatest saint in the congregation. When you feel you just can't express to God what you are really trying to say and ask, don't fret. A real father always knows what his child is trying to say. God knows what you are getting at, and may well have set the wheels in motion to grant your prayer before you finish your prayer or even got started. But He is ever so glad you spoke to Him about it. It means you trust Him.

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6:-9-15

Jesus assumes that His disciples will in fact pray and want to learn how to pray better. He must be very disappointed at times. This is a pattern of how to pray and was never meant to be the sum total of our prayer life. There is nothing so tragic as adult, grown up within the Church, who never get past the stage of repeating the Lord's Prayer at bedtime. Do our prayers conform to this pattern? It begins by considering God's person and His purposes on earth. We ask that His will should be done and His kingly rule exerted and in so doing we submit that it should begin in our own lives. His will shall in fact be done. There is no doubt about that for every knee shall finally bow. Then when we get lost in God, we begin to ask for our bread for the day, sustenance for soul and body, remembering that if the soul is sick the body cannot prosper (3 John 2). If we need sustenance daily so we need and ask for forgiveness. Then we ask for safety in our earthly pilgrimage, asking God to keep us from temptation, but if necessary, to allow it to come to hurt, confuse and frustrate us so that we may be kept from the evil one. Look all around you and ask the Lord to keep you at all cost. Then all your hope you place on His almighty strength and purpose, the contemplation of which leads you to a sense of

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safety, certainty and enjoyment. Yes, man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Note the only part of the prayer Jesus comments on (14-15) is the part we have passed over. And need no comment from us. Jesus' own words are best, and very blunt and searching at times.

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6:16-18

Jesus has spoken about the marks of a Christian: Almsgiving, Prayer, and now Fasting. He says we should keep it a secret. If it is what you claim it to be, namely a sacrifice to God, then people do not need to know anything about it. If Christian life is costing you dearly just now, put a bold face on it lest your mournful appearance draw attention to yourself instead of to Jesus. If you are in a close walk with God you will not lack a human confidant with whom to share the burden, so long as you are not proudly trying to be self-sufficient. But what does fasting mean? It is the opposite of indulgence and challenges the pleasure-seeking attitude of our lives. It involves doing without legitimate things for the more urgent aim of service. To give up things or people you have no right to have is neither fasting nor sacrifice. Fasting is also the denial of all that interferes with and keeps us from fellowship with God and His service. But there is a reward.

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6:19-23

Jesus knows our hearts, and knows how double they can be. We sing our consecration to Christ but our hearts crave the escapism of worldliness. We love things. We love the easy carelessness of worldly companions and activities. It is all so free from responsibility and deep thoughts of God and the Devil and eternity. Then in due season, because these are the things that really matter to us, we will disappear from Church, stop praying and certainly forget our Bibles. The only snag to such an attitude to life is that we eat and drink, and of course, we die. And we can't take it with us when we die. What are we left with? Nothing. Is that heaven? No it is the other place where our double vision has cleared and we become aware of the evil of the darkness that we tried to persuade ourselves was light. A good honest look at the facts of life would do us all a power of good. We who pride ourselves on our business acumen and judgment are apt to be blind to facts, else we would live differently. Look at the things you chose to live with and for rather than Jesus. None of them can last. All of them may well go before you go. What then?

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6:24-30

How startling are Jesus' sermons and how He seems to plunge from one heart-searching thought to the next. A man must make his mind up who is to be the master he will serve, God or the devil. These are the two alternatives. It is impossible to do both, although many try. But to obey the dictates of conflicting and confusing claims in life is to divide and ultimately destroy the whole personality. Worldliness and discipleship cannot go together. Your interests will betray you for what you are. Then at once Jesus goes on to speak very sweet words which banish the fretting care and anxiety that so often torture our lives. Let it be put simply. It matters to God about you. After all, anxiety accomplishes nothing except an increase in tiredness. Indeed it is pointless, for the God who cares for the sparrows and so graciously and bountifully clothes the lilies, and so liberally fills the earth with satisfactions for eye, mind and body, is not likely to forget or neglect the crown of His creation, the men and women for whom He sent His Son. Oh you of little faith, why do you doubt? God cares for you.

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6:31-34.

How we fret and worry about little things. How we plan for the future which may never come; for none of us for all our striving can add one hour (27) to the span of our life. We have only one life and it speeds past. Not an hour let alone a day can be recalled. For some, more than half of life is past and nothing of worth in the sight of God has yet been accomplished. Life has been full of petty frivolity. For some, the remaining time is measured in months or days rather than years. Are they too to be wasted in vain worldliness. Ah, you say, I want to be happy. In which world? But surely there is happiness to be found here. Certainly, seek first the kingdom of God,

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giving your heart to the King to love Him, obey and serve Him. Let your loyalty be to Him above all else to work and labour and strive and suffer on and on till the end of the road. What of the happiness? All these things shall be added unto you. "Fading is the worldling's pleasure (to say nothing of the fading worldling in spite of all efforts at camouflage). Solid joy and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know." Do you really think when you sing that hymn?

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7:1-5

Do not judge, but don't go around with your eyes shut pretending that everyone is nice. They are not. Some of them are far too much in league with the devil to be nice. Judge not, in the sense of passing final judgment on anyone, because it is not your province and you are not competent to judge since you can never know the struggles and sore sorrow of the person you judge. "What's done we partly may compute, But know not what's resisted." (Burns, Address to the unco guid). Matthew's verses speak to those possessed of a critical spirit and warn that a spirit of judgment recoils to smite the giver. This can become a vicious circle of bitterness that destroys a fellowship. Don't complain of how people treat you; you get what you give. When we take it upon ourselves to deal with others (for their good, we say) we often see in them our own sins. But Jesus says our sins are planks, theirs are specks of sawdust. Note that Jesus speaks of *beholding* the specks. We are better at criticism than cure. Thou hypocrite!

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7: 6

Sometimes Christians go to great lengths to speak to their fellows about Jesus and fail to realise that they are being led on by their mocking workmates for no other purpose than to provide some fun. For them it is all a game, good while it lasts, good for a laugh or a discussion, but not to be taken seriously. Jesus speaks about dogs and pigs. What does He mean? There are some who have no sensitivity to or appreciation of holy things and we are not to dishonour our holy Lord by "offering" Him to such people and pleading that they should say a nice word about Him. We must guard against giving or revealing to such people as these, profane as Esau was profane, the deep and holy emotions of our hearts. This is not that we might be saved embarrassment, but lest they be made worse than they are at present (2 Cor.2:15-16). We are to mark such people, and avoid them (Rom. 16:17). There is a time to speak and to challenge in the name of Christ, but there is a time to hold your peace and refuse to be drawn into conversation about holy things because sincerity of desire is not there. If we guard against this in others, be doubly on guard lest we ourselves be found guilty of over-familiarity with holy things and, by our jesting irreverence, we mar our worship.

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7:7-11

Prayer! The neglected grace of our Christian lives. In spite of all the exhortations of the Bible we seem to do anything rather than pray. Why? Is it not that real prayer is done out of sight and as a result there is no recognition or reward from others. We covet and cultivate the fellowship of people whom we consider will be able to benefit us. We fawn upon them and put up with many insults to our personalities so that we might receive a few crumbs from off their table. But we will not pray to this God who is likened to a Father and whose desire and willingness to bless is expressed in the most lavish terms. There is no groveling, and you rise from your knees with more dignity and peace and poise than before. That is not surprising, for you have been speaking to a really big man (God the Father Almighty) about the things that matter most to you, and having done so, you rest assured of the answer. Yes, prayer has much to do with rest, for they that wait upon the Lord renew their strength (Isaa.40:31). Many a tired saint has proved that at the end of the prayer meeting! Read the staggering simplicity of today's verses. Why do you not pray? Is it because you are afraid God will take you at your word and really answer? My own minister counseled me as a young over-confident divinity student, "Be careful what you pray for. You'll get it!"

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7:12

We call this the golden rule and we talk about it, but to practise it is a different story. It follows on from the previous verses saying, since God is so instant in His kindness and care for you, and since you have received from Him so much that you could never have deserved, go and be like that to others. Notice that *you* are to set the pace and the standard. Far too often our attitude is, “He treated me like that, I'll pay him back in his own coin.” The result of that is bitterness and enmity ever on the increase. You desire grace, kindness, forbearance, humanity, friendliness and openness. Whatsoever you want that people should do to you, you do the same to them! This is the sum of the law and the prophets, that we should love God and our neighbour. We must learn how to treat people. They were not made by God to serve as doormats for us in our hours of ill-temper and then as toys in our times of inclination. They are not our servants at all but God's, and He treats His servants well, with a gracious mixture of discipline and gentleness. What if such grace is spurned by your fellows? It will bring you closer to Jesus for your life will be like His.

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7:13-14

The Sermon on the Mount was a long one, and every section of it was packed with truth and teaching requiring great concentration at the time and long continued consideration thereafter. A sermon is not meant to be something you cope with pleurably during the service. It should have enough stuffing (not padding) in it to keep you chewing over it a whole week. We are not to over-simplify the facts, making God's truth all sound infantile, but to present the stark and startling truth as Jesus does here so that complacent religious people, who assume all too easily that they are going to heaven, might be shaken to their depths. It is tragic to sit in a congregation and become aware that the minister is assuming all his hearers are Christians and that all of them in the end somehow are going to be saved. Most people believe that in the end a *few* really terrible people will go to hell. But here, Jesus says *few* find the way to life. Think on that next Sunday as you look around you on the way to Church and inside it. There is a gate, a way, and an end. Two alternatives are shown with a great gulf fixed between them. Life is to be desired and destruction to be feared. To believe such verses as these is to be possessed of a great urgency and serious sincerity when you preach and pray.

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7:15-20

There are people in hell because their ministers never told them they needed to be saved. There are people kept from Church and Prayer Meeting because of what other religious folk, even in their own families, would say. Beware of false prophets for in the end they will make you share their destruction. Be careful and watchful in spheres of religious profession for not all who mouth the name of Jesus, calling Him Lord, really belong to Him. There is only one test of a man or his ministry. What is the fruit of it? Don't judge by words, for you can speak rightly and live wrongly. What is the man like? Ask his family and workmates. What is the influence of his life? Does it make you want to be a better Christian or does it draw you away from Jesus? You can always tell by the fruit, but since fruit often takes a long time to germinate, flower and ripen, don't be too hasty in your judgment. But be very careful. Any gardener will tell you that certain strong looking shoots from a rose bush are nothing but suckers. In spite of all their foliage they will never produce flowers and if left alone will bleed away the life of the plant. God does the pruning. That's a comfort. (John 15: 1-6). It also makes you think!

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7:21-23

Isn't Jesus relentless in pressing home the truth? Was He not satisfied when people spoke His name and launched into what they called Christian service? NO, for their service was false. But they had results. They preached with strange intensity and passion; people were moved in response, some were healed and demons were cast out. But Jesus says they were not His, and they were rejected. Have you ever considered that results are easy to produce, especially with a little help from a certain quarter. The Devil has gained a great victory if he can engineer people into doing Christian service out of a spirit and motive of self-will. We need to sift our motives very carefully, especially with regard to our desire to preach. It may be nothing more than sheer self-

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gratification. We do it because we like it. It gives us a sense of power though we would never admit it. We need to examine many little "works" that are nothing more than the wilful products of some who are too proud to be under authority in a regular ministry. The people Jesus speaks of here did everything except obey Him. That means they did nothing acceptable to Him and were rejected. In actual fact they worked iniquity and did devil's work in the Church!

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7:24-29

Jesus finishes His sermon without a protracted appeal, for He leaves the truth to do its work. After all, with so much teaching of depth and intensity spoken, the emotions of the hearers were in no condition to give a valid on-the-spot response. We must never ask people to "decide" until they are quite sure what they are deciding about. There was an authority about this kind of preaching that needed nothing added to it. It is interesting to look ahead to chap. 8:1 and 18, and see Jesus' awareness of the danger and deceptiveness of mass movements. But what of the passage? Two men heard the same sermon. One took it superficially and in no time at all had an edifice built to the amazement and adulation of all who saw it. The other fellow took it harder. The sermon had knocked him flat. His face was long and his heart heavy for the Word had cut very deep, right down to the foundation of his life in fact. He was despaired of, and held as of little value or significance for he had little to show. But he was digging down through all the emotional inheritance of his past, clearing the rubble of many days, shaking free from a self-will that had so long governed his activity, and being more bound to Christ in utter obedience that was costing him agony. But when the test came, one man came down with a big noise, for that was all he was. The other stood, and stood and stood, and having done all, still stood. Hallelujah.

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8:1-4

Preaching that is with authority is always resented, but the facts attendant on such a ministry cannot be disputed. Out of the many came one man who knew what he needed, asked for it and was healed, and was immediately told to keep it quiet and not blaze it abroad. This is different from militant evangelists who are always publishing statistics and urging newly healed souls to launch into declaration concerning a Christ they have just newly met. Publicity is a very dangerous and distracting thing and can all too often attract to a work of God wholly undesirable characters who, by their unbalanced extravagance, bring dishonour on the work and Word. The power of Jesus to heal is manifest. It was instantaneous. But there is a great mystery about sickness for it is not always healed. Nor can we say that sickness is always contrary to the will of God. Many have cause to bless long continued illness that brought them first to Christ or back from backsliding. It may not be part of God's plan to heal in a given case, and the leper who came and worshipped recognised this to be so and first submitted himself to the over-ruling, all-embracing, far-seeing will of the Lord. "If you are willing..." and Jesus did so. Apply this principle to your life. Thy will be done.

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8:5-13

Capernaum was a stronghold of unbelief (11:23), and the Roman, an outsider by the standards of the Jews, with his faith so real, direct, earnest and human was a living judgment on the deadness of all their empty religiosity. Note that it was for his servant that the man sought blessing, not himself. He loved his servant and by love became servant himself. The centurion was a big man. He had authority delegated to him by Rome and he saw to it that those under him obeyed. There was neither despotism nor weakness. He was firm but human in his care for those under him, and mixed with it all was genuine humility. "I am not worthy to have you in my house", he said, recognising the dignity and superiority of Jesus. But there was also a tremendous faith. This Jesus had proved Himself to be one with power and the centurion could not doubt. There was no need for commotion. Speak but the word. Jesus could only marvel at such absolute trust and grant its request. The man expected his prayer would be answered and would have been mightily surprised if it had been otherwise. According to your faith be it unto you.

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8:14-18

A third miracle of healing is done with the greatest simplicity and we can well imagine with what gladness and gratitude of heart the woman ministered to Jesus and His companions. But there was no rest for Jesus. When evening came, and by normal standards the day's work was done, there gathered to Jesus all who had a need and He healed them with His word. Sometimes He touched them if that was needed to help their faith; sometimes He went to their homes; sometimes miles lay between, but it was His word that healed. But it was the hearing of His word and hearing it themselves personally that brought them all with their needs. This is the continuing miracle of the Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever. The Word preached creates its own pastoral work and to watch human lives being healed and recreated in hope is richest reward. But Jesus withdrew, for His was a deeper work yet. He had to bear their infirmities and that meant the Cross from which nothing was to distract Him. But He left. Behind three we know of and many another who would never forget this day and what had been done for them by the Word of Jesus. Have you forgotten what He has done for you?

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8:18-23

Spare a thought for the disciples. How perplexed they must have been when Jesus, just at the moment of success, decided to leave. How staggered they must have been at the conversation here recorded. But they went with Him. What held them? It was their attraction to Jesus Himself, and that is the only thing that will keep people true. Anything less will always come to the stage of saying "no further". The standard is high: far higher than we hear preached in modern evangelical circles where the Gospel seems to be all get and no give. It takes more than a passing inclination to throw in your lot with Jesus. Many a man would fain take his stand beneath the Cross of Jesus but never does it because of the cost. The love of creature comforts and the love of human relationships are the barriers. No doubt these verses could be explained fully, even explained away, to make discipleship easier. But Jesus spoke starkly and we cannot better His methods or words. To all who dare to say, "Master I will follow," He asks the same blunt question, "Do you mean it?" Well, do you?

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8:24-27

Having counted the cost they followed Jesus even when they could not understand Him and were led into the worst storm their lives had ever known. Therein is a parable. The storm was really bad and these seasoned fishermen felt they were lost, and feared. But their deepest fear was that it seemed as if Jesus did not care. How foolish of them, as if the Master would ever be neglectful of those who had loved Him enough to stick to Him. It seems so ridiculous when it is all over and Jesus has rebuked the angry waves, but we must learn to trust all the time, because at the heart of the storm is Jesus. Think of Him, utterly detached from circumstances, altogether at peace, for you see, He was not really lying on hard boards in a storm-tossed boat. He was in the arms of the everlasting Father. That makes all the difference in the world. What a relief! Goodnight. Sleep well. "The waves and winds still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below." (Hymn, "Be still my soul...")

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8:28-34

Two miracles are here: the healing of the man possessed and the hardness of heart of those who pleaded with Jesus to go away and leave them alone. Put it bluntly, there are still those who much prefer that people should remain in the grasp of the devil than that any intrusion of Jesus into their society should change their ways and stop their profits from their pigs. When you consider it, the people of Gadara were far more in the power of the devil than the atrocious, mixed up delinquents of men so fierce in their pitiful spasms of fury. The devils knew Jesus' power and feared. People knew Jesus' power, for they saw with their own eyes what it could do, but they did not fear, save to fear for their precious pigs. It was pigs or Jesus; and the pigs won. We dare not comment any more. We have all too many pigs.

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9:1-8

Jesus left the people who did not want Him. He took them at their word, obeying His own sermon in chap.7:6. Then in Capernaum (His own town) He fell foul of a company of critics and cowards who found themselves being displaced from their former importance by this new thing that had come amongst them with the advent of Jesus and His disciples. Their religion did not work, and when Jesus came with the word of forgiveness and power unto newness of life they resented it. But being cowards, they tried to criticise behind His back, hoping no doubt to gather to themselves a few more disgruntled souls. But, as is His wont, Jesus would have none of this and dragged them out into the open, asserted His place and power, confounded them with proof that God was with Him and not with them, and then left them without giving them a chance to argue. Was Jesus being vindictive? No! It was war, and He knew it, and all aligned with the powers of evil had to be challenged. It had to be and must be so!

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9:9-13

Some people find fault with Jesus no matter what He does. In fact, the more Jesus shows His grace and compassion and power to heal and save and transform, the more they complain and become hardened. Jesus acceptance of Levi, who is none other than the Matthew who later wrote this record of the Gospel, was the thing they could not swallow this time. In the eyes of the Pharisees he was a despicable reject and outcast, a Jewish traitor fallen from grace and fit only for the rubbish dump of humanity. But Jesus saw a man, with all the possibilities of his broken nature latent within him. And He was right, for He called Levi, who followed without a moment's hesitation, and gave us in due season this account of the King Jesus. Little wonder that all the sinners came to Jesus. If there was hope for Levi there was hope for them and for us. But the Pharisees would have none of it for themselves or others. Sinners should be condemned, they said. Ferret out their wrongs, never mind if they are ashamed and want to be better; brand them with guilt, ostracise them, and keep the kingdom to ourselves who are the fine religious folk. To such proud religious people Jesus had no word, except to go and learn what God is like.

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9:14-17

Neither the Pharisees nor the disciples of John the Baptist could understand why Jesus was so human. There was an attractiveness about His life that had power to draw people and to change them. Jesus was a true non-conformist, refusing to bow to a religion of sheer man-made convention that put people in shackles of fear and dread lest they should offend God and be cast off. Jesus is not waiting for us to make a mistake so that He can cast us off. He is not vindictive. He *wants* you, your heart, your person, yes, your affection and love and loyalty. What about this and that and other things they say a Christian should not do? Who are *they*? What does Jesus say? There is a time and place for everything. This is not licence to do as you please, but to do as Jesus pleases. But Jesus changes even things that evangelicals cling to with fervent rigidity. Yes, indeed He does, He refuses to be fitted in or on to any man's scheme of things. He comes to change, and lead, and supervise and make all things gloriously new. This is the pulse of life and not the rigidity of death.

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9:18-26

There is just no stopping this Jesus. Wherever He is there is something unexpected and wonderful happening. Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue and the woman was an outcast from it. The man's crisis was sudden and sharp but the woman's a long weary burden for twelve years. The man came running openly and Jesus answered his faith and went with him. The poor soul of a woman felt so wretched and inconsequential that she crept near in the crowd. But the two very different people had this in common, a determination to get to Jesus else there was nothing for them but despair. Both discovered that they mattered to Jesus and at once their burden eased. Can you imagine the embarrassment of the woman when all eyes were turned on her. How kind Jesus was. She would always remember He called her daughter. The only cloud in the whole story is the reception of mockery

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Jesus got at Jairus' house. Such scoffers were put out and were not allowed to see the proof of His power. Jesus knew full well that even if they saw, they still would not believe. Make sure you never laugh at Jesus.

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9:27-34

Just how perverse can people be? It is not a question of not understanding, nor of too high a standard being set. The plain evidence was before their eyes and when some acknowledged that this was indeed a wondrous work, others said it was of the Devil. Why did they so hate Jesus and His works of mercy? It was jealousy. Without Jesus, they were men of power in the world of religion, exercising influence unchecked. But the Son of God challenged their attitudes, actions, and practices which had proved to be powerless to heal and save. But if their desire, as the existing leaders of the people, was genuine would they not respond gladly to this revealing of true power from God to save? You would think so, but they didn't, and we can only conclude they were more concerned with maintaining their own dictatorship and leadership than with the helping and healing of their people. Their hatred of Jesus and resistance to all He did was inevitable. It was Jesus or them, and they would not yield. How awful! How sure was their judgment! One word of encouragement: Jesus did not at first answer the request of the blind men. He drew them on, and every step they followed seemed to increase the reality of their faith. They got their request in the end. Then they reacted with excited emotion and did the very thing Jesus commanded them not to do.

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9:35-38

Have you ever noticed the complete lack of hesitation in Jesus? The blasts of criticism never stopped but Jesus went on His way teaching and healing. He refused to allow Himself to be distracted from caring for the sheep by the yapping of stray dogs. How He cared for all those who were found round about Him. He was a Saviour who always had a sore heart, and He still yearns over humanity. How He must grieve at the sight of so many young lives being tainted and led astray in empty worldliness that will ultimately destroy as well as frustrate their hopes of happiness. Now, note very carefully what Jesus does. He draws the attention of the disciples to the need and commands them to pray: to pray to the only one who has both wisdom and power to deal with the need in its true nature and dimension. They were not to rush in with schemes or plans. They were to wait until God sent forth labourers, for it is only when a person is sent to do what God has commanded him to do that any good can come (Rom.10:15). How we echo the cry that the harvest is plenteous, and the labourers are few. Pray therefore. PRAY! PRAY! PRAY! And if you don't, God will ask you one day why you didn't!

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10:1-4

The Lord of the harvest sends out His chosen labourers. They had to learn first of all to pray. Then He called them to Himself, not just to the work. That is very important, for you cannot teach of a Jesus you do not really know, and a second-hand faith will cut no ice, especially with young people, cf. Acts 19: 13-16. Human power, whether it be example or exhortation, is of no avail to meet the needs of men. By nature men are fallen and sinful; they are defective and perverted from God, and no power can change and redeem save that of Christ. And that power is given by Christ alone to those alone He has called to Himself and sent out to service. To go without that power is vain, for at best you will only persuade people that their need is not so radical as the Bible says. There will be people of every age on the Day of Judgment who will, with justification, ask why they were not told of these eternal issues. But many will have to acknowledge that though it was all told them from the Bible they still did not believe. Never hide the truth, even when unpalatable, for it is the beginning of reality in life. Never forget in the battle for truth that there is usually a Judas among the twelve.

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10:5-15

Their work was to preach with a note of urgency in the message and it was to be selective, not that the Jews might benefit to the exclusion of the Gentiles, but that the Jews being blessed might be the means of reaching

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the Gentiles. The workers are not to calculate and plan after the manner of men as if they were running a business. This is God's work and He is in the work and with them in person. Therefore they will not lack, since God expects His servants to be looked after by those to whom they are a blessing (cf. 1 Cor. 9:11-13). They are to manifest no craven spirit of fear or apology for they speak in the name of God Himself. Therefore they must never let their persons be accepted if their message is not received; nor must they give their peaceful greeting and continuing presence to those who will not receive the message. God's work must be done according to God's commands and in no other way. That it will divide people cannot be denied, nor can it be avoided. But as the work of God proceeds on its inexorable way to completion and victory, all are judged by their attitude to it. Places of gross evil will be condemned in God's judgment, but even greater will be the judgment of those who have heard long and often yet have never heeded. Wilful refusal of God's word is deepest sin.

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10:16-23

Jesus is too honest to try to conceal the cost of faithful discipleship. Disciples are sent out like defenceless sheep in the midst of their sworn enemies who prowl in cowardly packs. How difficult it is to be wise as well as harmless. These two graces lie very deep; wise balance and guileless sincerity can never be ours unless we know we are concerned more with pleasing God than men. Even our sincerity will not be respected. For every one who turns and believes our testimony there will be others who will turn to criticize and scorn. In secular realms and in Church realms faithfulness to Christ and the Gospel will mean suffering. Take Jesus' words here as they stand: they will hate you for being true to Jesus, but we need never panic as to what will happen at any given crisis. God is in it and will not leave you without the necessary words to speak in defence. Once you have proved this, there should never again be fear. The true Christian will be marked by this above all else, that he will go on, and keep going on, spite of all the fury of hell and hellish people. Then comes the day of the Son of man, and with it the judgment.

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10:24-25

The cost and comfort of discipleship are always found together. There are many who wear themselves out trying to find and enjoy the pleasures that are in Jesus and fail because they will not see that the sparkling jewels of rich joy are found nestling in the black cloth of costly service. Do you remember Jesus saying to His disciples, "I have meat to eat ye know not of" (John 4:31-34 AV). There is secret manna; secret pleasure; secret fountains of sheer delight; and they are found as you walk the road with the Man of sorrows. How kindly Jesus speaks here to His own as He asks them to be content to be just like Him. We must be very careful never to ask or seek better treatment at the hands of men than Jesus got. After all there is often good reason why people should criticise us, for we are changeable, moody, huffy, inconsistent, selfish and inconsiderate. Much of what we call persecution for the Gospel's sake is simply the rightful reward of ungracious living towards our fellows. But Jesus was not so, and when He was reviled He reviled not again (1 Pet.2:21-23 AV). Think of that today and it will have a mellowing effect.

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10:26-31

How often Jesus says not to fear! Don't shut your eyes to what people may possibly try to do. Face the worst and fear not because Jesus is taking care of you. Of course you must be right yourself for every single thing is to be dragged out into the open and if you are living a double life that too will be exposed by the inexorable development of circumstances. But if we are prepared to be faithful with implicit obedience in everything He tells and commands, then we are safe, even to the hairs of our heads. Not a finger can touch us except by the express permission of God and then only for a set time, for our good and the furtherance of our holy service. Which would you rather be, in with God and out with men, or in with the smarmy patronage of men and out with God? Fear God and you will have nothing else to fear, for He values you. You are precious in His sight. It matters to God about you, and your work, and your family. Fear not.

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10:32-38

Back to consider the cost. In public life and family life it costs to take sides with Jesus. To have any allegiance greater than that we have towards Jesus is to dishonour Him and disqualify ourselves. A great deal of the strain that exhausts us is nothing other than trying to reconcile the various conflicting loyalties that strive for the love of our hearts. Take Jesus' words very literally here. You must take sides for or against Him, and what you do here He will ratify with eternal permanence in the world to come. This is no call for any extravagance or oddity of behaviour, but a challenge to practical choice and disposition of life and activity. Don't say you do not understand, just follow and you will soon learn. Of course you may be a little embarrassed at first perhaps because of your age when you find yourself side by side with young folk. But then you should not have left it so long. It would have been easier for some people to start coming to the prayer meeting years ago. It will not get any easier, and you must take sides. Read the passage again and then plan your week.

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10:39-42

These thoughts may seem very narrow and leading to a very barren life, but Jesus says it is not so. You can keep your life to yourself and tick off each day on the calendar. (You may not have many to tick.) Then when it is all gone, it is in fact all gone and you are left with nothing. But if you give over your life to Jesus you tick off days of preparation, and then life begins and never ends for it is eternal. And the life that Jesus gives here on earth is full to overflowing for it is one long process of discovering the treasures and delights of every possible human capacity. It may not always set the nerves tingling (it does sometimes) with immediate surges of pleasure and thrill, but it moves and satisfies the deep elemental desires and hungers of the human heart. Taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps.34:3-8). Notice here also that we are told to receive the prophets God sends and in taking sides with them we receive our reward. We are also rewarded for shepherding the little ones. Take great care of them and lead them aright for they belong to Jesus. Make sure you are doing right for their sakes if not your own.

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11:1-6

There was always a great deal of talk about and criticism of Jesus' ministry and there will always be the same wherever Jesus' word is faithfully passed on. But we must not allow our verdict to be based on gossip, or on our pet likes and dislikes, and certainly not on habit and custom. The test is fruit. What is it doing? What is it producing? Are the changes in people working for the better or worse? Jesus answers John's question by telling him to look back and remember how things were and to compare that with what is now happening. He leaves John to form his own conclusions and adds a comment in v.6 which is rather startling. Does Jesus mean that some people when they see the life-changing power of His word at work would rather have the cold barren deadness of lifeless religion? Yes, indeed He does, and He is quite right. Of course fruit takes quite a time to ripen, but the foliage, let alone the bud and blossom, tells you the kind of tree it is. There are none so blind as those who for various reasons refuse to see.

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11:7-15

Jesus now addresses the crowd and vindicates John for being prepared to stand against the tide of popular religious ideas. He was not swayed by convenience, nor was he 'nice' in manner or attitude. He was a prophet whose only concern was to speak forth the word of the Lord. Jesus certifies that this man was in fact sent by God for a special work: a work marked by stringent moral demands and totally lacking in the frills of happy social gatherings. It was a ministry of straight and direct speaking, warning, and thundering the deep things of God. Its mark was an earnestness that continued in the face of both sly and open hatred and opposition. The fact that John was now in prison and no doubt in disgrace was no denial of the authenticity of his God-given ministry. He is a happy man who can see through the accumulated layers of fashionable preaching and recognize the real thing when it is seen and heard. When it is heard, get after it, wrestle, strive, battle as if your life depended on it, for such is the way to the Kingdom.

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11:16-19

There is a perversity about people which reveals their difficulties and disagreements about the Gospel to be nothing but rank hypocrisy. Whichever way the Gospel is presented they say it is wrong. No matter what you do or say you are wrong. If you stand against people in the name of the truth, you are hard and dictatorial. If you yield they will trample right over you and pass on taking no notice of your words. The sermon will be too hard or too sentimental; too spiritual or too practical; too long or too short. No, whichever way Jesus is presented the attitude is the same - we will have nothing to do with Him. That is sheer perversity born of hell and is a warning to all Christians to be very careful not to be taken in by the apparent interest of people who have never had any intention of being converted. But in a restless and unreasonable age, God's wisdom in the many sided message is justified by its many children and works. Even when you do not quite understand why God's Word to you should be in a certain tone, accept it, for God knows what He is saying and doing. You usually end up saying, sooner rather than later,

"Yes, God was right again."

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11:20-27

There comes a time when the sombre reality of facts may no longer be concealed behind the facade of sentimentality about the things of God. When the mighty word and works of Jesus are received in blatant unbelief that takes absolutely no notice, then people and cities must be charged with their unbelief and warned of the consequences thereof. It will be better on the Day of Judgment for people who have never heard the truth than for those who have in proud practice despised it. The word of Jesus and the fruit it had produced witnessed against them to their condemnation. If Jesus did most of His mighty works in these places He must have spent a fair part of His time there, and His presence was no doubt a blessing and a profit to the whole community. But where such people blandly take the profits of Jesus' presence, while at the same time rejecting His person and His authority, there can be no issue but rightful judgment. If other places would have repented, why did Jesus spend time in these particular places such as Capernaum? That is a mystery. Consider 2 Pet.3:8-14. But in the end God shall be glorified and vindicated in those that are lost as well as those that are saved. Hell is not an embarrassment to a holy and righteous God; nor will it be so to us when we see things as they really are.

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11:28-30

We really need to read in from v.25, where, over against the solemnity of Jesus' word of judgment and punishment, there is a note of quiet peace and assurance as He rests in the will and purpose of the all-wise Father. Facts are the beginning of peace, and it is this true and honest Jesus who speaks the inexpressible words of comfort in the verses for today. There is a rest that comes with the yoke of Jesus. Part of it lies in obeying Him, in childlike trust, instead of the proud impulses of our own hearts and desires. The other part lies in being changed in thought and attitude and personality to be like Him whose whole life was peace. We cannot comment here adequately on such verses as these, and simply commend them to be read over and over again. They are words for prodigals and rebels. "In returning and rest ye shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength." (Isa.30:15 AV) Read the verse in Isaiah, and note the last four words!

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12: 1-9

This whole chapter concerns the on-going conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus which now comes into the open and each incident must be considered in the light of v.14. That was their true attitude. They were out to trip Jesus, and that makes their ultra-holy attitude to the Sabbath a sheer mockery. Of course Jesus' words do not excuse any laxity with regard to the law of God concerning the Sabbath. It is God's law and there is a price to pay for holding it in contempt. In any case, the disciples were not harvesting but merely plucking a few ears of

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corn to ease their hunger as they accompanied with the Son of God on heavenly business. And since Jesus did not check them, no man had any right to do so. There is a mighty difference between boiling some potatoes on Sunday and doing a whole baking or digging the garden. Just as there is a difference between visiting some old sick person to cheer him and visiting friends to indulge in empty, worldly cackle, when you should be in Church. The Sabbath is not for argument, but for pleasing Jesus. Remember, it is Jesus who is Lord of the Sabbath, not we. His pleasure is the important thing, not ours.

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12: 10-14

Now things had become critical and an open show of strength was unavoidable. Is that to be regretted? No, indeed! It is Jesus who challenges His critics as He tells the man to stretch forth his hand. It seems that in earlier days of challenge Jesus had held back and restrained Himself, to give ample opportunity for people to reconsider their whole attitude to Him and His Word and His saving work amongst them. Now, in the face of continued hardness of heart that constituted a barrier and opposition to a work that was reaching out to the needy, there could be no more uneasy peace. He charged them with insincerity. For all their professed care for people, when they faced a need they were not meeting, rather than give way so that it might be done by Jesus, they would leave the man with his withered hand. Do you see the hellishness of their sin? Their way of doing things, and of course their governing of it, was more important than the people they were supposed to be serving. Jesus will have none of that. But in doing so He signed His death warrant. They never forgave Him. That shows how wrong they were.

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12:15-21

There is a time to speak and a time for silence; a time to stand your ground and a time to slip quietly away. No doubt the disciples were puzzled that Jesus did not strike there and then and follow through on His obvious advantage. The answer is really simple. Jesus was not concerned with scoring points, nor with destroying people. He came to save, and His grace was ready to bear and forbear as long as was possible. He knew that the day for God finally to deal with these wicked opposers of grace and salvation would surely come, and that their judgment was certain. Every faint sign of softening of heart would be eagerly looked for and every faltering step after God's truth and way would be instantly and graciously encouraged. He would give every cause for people to put their trust in His name. But is it not weakness to be too kindly patient? Will people not take advantage? No doubt they will, but they are wrong. This is strength, and it applies in a thousand daily paths. See ye to it.

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12: 22-30

We wonder who brought the demon-possessed man to Jesus. Was it someone who cared and knew Jesus would heal? Or was it some devil-inspired character who sought to challenge Jesus and outwit Him? The devil does not know that he is beaten before he starts. When the man was healed, the people said "Could this be the son of David after all?" Then when the Pharisees heard what the people said their jealousy turned to hatred and they made the most bitter but most ridiculous charge against Jesus. They said Jesus was in league with the devil. Did they believe the devil would heal a man? He might of course, if thereby he could beguile souls away from Jesus! Jesus points to this one example of His liberating and transforming power, and one example is enough to prove the case. Then He applies the message in a blunt ultimatum in v.30. He that is not with Me is against Me. He that is not prepared to cast in his lot with Me to do this new work in obedience to God-given leadership, is in fact working against Me. We are enemies. We are either God's men or the devil's. One is liberty and life, the other tyranny and death. Keep in mind that demon-possession is not always accompanied by wild, ugly and exaggerated behaviour. It can be cold, calculating, polite but ruthless behaviour. Don't be deceived!

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12:31-32

It is in the light of what has gone before that we must read these verses which, when taken out of context, can become the weapon of Satan to cause untold dread in the hearts of many. But we must not blunt the edge of their truth. In the light of Jesus' words and works there are men and women who are damning their souls for life and eternity. When people look on what claims to be the work of God, and which testifies by its fruit to be of God, and yet decline to share it and in fact criticise and oppose it, they are placing themselves outside the hope of forgiveness. That there are such persons we cannot doubt, persons utterly insensitive to holy things, callous in regard to spiritual truth and teaching, bitter and ruthless in will. To such there is no real ministry save that of judgment to come, so that the hard blows of God's Word might yet penetrate their stony hearts. Take heed that there be not in you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Heb3:7-19). There is no returning.

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12: 33-37

Jesus is very blunt in His preaching. He makes men their own judges. In answer to His Word authenticated by healed and transformed lives, men speak their response by lip, life and attitude, and in so doing justify or condemn themselves before God. If there was anything uncertain or doubtful about Jesus and the way He did things, men might have a right to be suspicious and hesitant. They would need to have a powerful alternative to offer. But since the fruit of Jesus' ministry and the fruit of His disciples' ministry was so abundantly and obviously good, there was no excuse. Jesus' words in v.34 are not calculated to increase His popularity with a congregation. Some would say that such speaking of the truth should be avoided in the interests of winning people for Christ. Lies will never win them. To condone their hypocrisy will only harden them in complacency, leaving them to think they are still God's men, doing God's work and sure of God's heaven. These men were not! And no man whose heart refuses utter obedience to Jesus has any part in God. You cannot do anything that pleases God, no matter how hard you work, if your heart is not right with Jesus. Jesus left it as bluntly as that!

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12:38-42

How impudent some people can get. They called Him Master to His face yet treated Him like an inconsequential tramp. They demanded a sign, a testimonial from Him to commend Him to their approval. They pretended sincerity when they asked a sign, implying that if it were granted they would believe. They had seen signs in abundance. They were to see a mightier one as Jesus hung on the Cross and they were to answer, "Come down from the Cross and we will follow Thee." They were to see an empty grave and a risen Christ and still they were not disposed to change their minds about Jesus and change their way of living. Away with all double-dyed hypocrisy of those who hang grimly on to their difficulties about believing and being converted. The difficulty is not in the mind but in the challenge of obedience. If some people had a grain more manliness they would have declared themselves for Christ long ago and been a joy instead of a heart-break in the congregation. It is the preaching that is the test. It is the preaching that brings some and drives away others. It is not the preacher, but what he says from the Bible that sifts and saves, cf. Luke 16:19-31. That tells of a man who ignored the preaching, and see where he ended.

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12:43-45

This long encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees right through this chapter is staggering in its solemnity. The Master was going to make a job of it and not leave any ambiguity. Jesus knew that some were stirred by His words, but not stirred deeply enough. There are some who make a show of some response to Jesus, feeling that others would be surprised and shocked if they did not. But that does not constitute conversion. Nor will God accept that kind of response as an alternative to real change of heart. In fact such compromise opens the door to a worse state than the first, for it is essentially negative and leaves the home of the heart empty in a double sense. The former things are not there but neither is Jesus, and in due season the old life returns, fortified by its holiday, and the last state is worse than the first. We have not mentioned the actual presence and influence of evil spirits, but they are there, and here, and working all the more effectively because people refuse to believe

in them. The opponents of Jesus had their intelligence sharpened and certainly their courage increased by such demons. But demons have a Master, greater in intelligence and strength, and His name is Jesus. Trying to be simple, we say to children, "Jesus is stronger than Satan." Adults need to be told that, and to believe it!

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12:46-50

Jesus' true family is made very clear in the last verse. But He was one of an earthly family and in their care for Him they grieved as they saw the increasing conflict with the Pharisees. That was both natural and permissible, but when human care and affection sought to deflect Him from His holy calling, then Jesus stood His ground, for there is a loyalty higher than home and family. We too need to remember this, lest the God who has blessed us with home and family sees that His gifts and blessings are taking our hearts away from Him. He may need to remove the blessings. There is a tremendous conflict of loyalties in many hearts, and we can only thank God for loved ones who encourage us to be faithful to Jesus rather than the opposite. This is no denial of human care, for none cared so much for His mother as our Lord when He spoke to her so kindly to her from the agony of the Cross. But for Jesus to yield to their demands, however deep and sincere, at this point would have been to deny His calling. That could not be. But it was sore for Jesus since He was human too. Does that not ease the pain a bit when you find your family divided because of Jesus? You have something very personal in common with Him.

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13: 1-9 and 18-23

The explanation of the parable is given in the passage and tells of the varied results in people's hearts and lives consequent on the preaching or sowing of the Word. There are differing soils, but the seed is constant, and the life is in the seed. For three-quarters of the sowing there is no result worth speaking about because the ground of men's hearts is either beaten hard with the traffic of the world or so cluttered with rubbish that no life can take root and last. Even within the last quarter there is tremendous variation. Some prove choice plants but some barely justify their existence and the labour expounded and no more. But our labour is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor.15:58) in spite of such realistic statistics for God is concerned with quality not quantity. But why should some good soil produce so little? Some Christians of long standing are strangely barren of blossom or fruit. Is there some secret canker or rotten fungus hid away in the life that drains vitality from God's plant? An exquisite greenhouse with blinds drawn will soon go mouldy. But where sunlight is allowed in it is different. This is another parable. The windows of your soul may need a good clean. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear, and start spring- cleaning, and weeding. Break up your fallow ground! (Hos.10:12-13; Jer.4:1-3)

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13:10-17

The perplexity of the disciples seems to stem from the fact that they would not free themselves from sentimental notions about the result of Jesus' work. They and we must face the unpalatable truth that we might as well stop trying to make some people understand the Bible, for the simple reason that they don't want to understand. That is plainly stated in v.15, and it had been exemplified and acted upon by Jesus in the previous chapter where instead of pleading with bigoted religionists He told them what utter hypocrites they were. None of us like the idea of the Moderator of our General Assembly going begging to the Pope of Rome, and much more we should shrink from any suggestion of Jesus begging at the feet of proud sinners who have not the sincerity to say they are not interested. The "simple" Gospel has many deep treasures discoverable only to those who are earnest enough to press their way in regardless of difficulty or cost. You have to be real and in earnest. The rich young ruler went away at first and Jesus allowed him to go (Matt.19:16-22). We would like to think he came back later. But Judas was therein the disciple band all the time and at the last damned himself because of his duplicity and hardness. See ye to it.

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13:24-30 and 36-43

Like all cowards, the devil, whose work is to destroy, likes to do his work secretly. There was no immediate sign that an enemy had been in the field, but in due season it began to show that there were two camps, two leaders, two plans and they were contrary. They looked very like each other to begin with, but one crop was worthless while the other was of value and to be kept. The message is obvious. Within the sphere of Christian profession and the visible organisation we call the Church, there are those who are not part of God's work and in fact, in spite of appearances, are working against the kingdom, sowing weeds to choke and destroy God's crop and eventual harvest. There will always be the work of the enemy wherever there is a real work of God. We must expect it, and have our eyes wide open to detect the first signs of its appearing. But we must on no account fear the enemy or the worst he can do. The owner of the field was so sure of himself that he was content to let both grow together until the harvest when the separation would be clear cut and final. Judge nothing before the time (1 Cor. 4:5). The time *will* come, and it is a time of fearful anguish for some, but there is no sign of repentance (Rev.6:15-17). That testifies to the justice of their judgment.

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13:31-32

There are conflicting views about this and other parables. Some say this is a parable of the secret growth of the Kingdom from small beginnings to a vast tree in which many find shelter. That may be true and teaches us not to despise the day of small things. But mustard is not meant to grow to be a huge tree, and the birds spoken of in earlier parables are symbols of evil. What then does it mean? We have the visible church growing into a massive and increasingly complex organisation in which, by its very size, there shelter masses of things and people that are enemies of the Cross. Paul spoke of this in Philippians 3:18-19 and we must never forget it. There is so much of the world and its ways and its policies roosting in the branches of the tree that there is scarcely any. Church seen and when a man tries in the name of the Lord of the Church to chase away the birds he is opposed and persecuted as a fanatic. The Church of God is not a place for roosting in, but for holy and sanctified service. Make sure your part is making the Church what it is supposed to be. If that is too much to expect, make sure you are doing nothing to prevent others doing the work.

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13:33-35

Some interpret this as signifying the Church as a “Christianising” influence in the community and the world. If so she has signally failed, as witness the present world situation with its moral depravity and practical atheism. Jesus told us to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy (Lk.12:1). The epistles of Paul tell us to purge out the old leaven (1 Cor.5:6-9). If we apply this to our Christian service it simply means that if there is secret evil in our lives it will corrupt all our service. If we apply it to the work of the Church it means that when there is the leaven (yeast) of hypocrisy, rationalism like that of the Sadducees which denies the spiritual and eternal, or sheer worldliness like the Herodians, then the whole testimony of the Church is affected, and a blight spreads across her life. Has not this in fact come to pass, so that there is scarcely any difference between Church and world, save that the world's entertainment costs your pocket more and its buildings are more comfortable. But then, the Church is not meant for comfort, it is a base for commando action, and in spite of all the decay, God has a people, and a work, and it is going on in secret. Some people are going to get the shock of their lives one day when they realise what has been going on all unknown to them. Read Luke 13:22-30.

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13:44

The field is the world and the man represents Christ. His own children are the treasure upon which He sets such value, and for which He paid such a price. Note that it was with eager joy that he parted with all His riches and became poor so that He might make us His own without doubt. Now, Christian, if you tend to despise yourself and thrash yourself with feelings of unworthiness, take this word to yourself today, and stop saying derogatory things about someone who is valued by Jesus. Think of it: Jesus thinks you are worth dying for; worth persevering with; worth having with Him for His pleasure through all eternity. He paid the price for the whole

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field that He might possess the treasure. Lord make us worthy of such love and privilege. Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so. But look at the little word "hid" (44). What does that mean? It means He knows exactly where you are, and also that it does not yet appear what you shall be (1 John 3:1-3). Jesus will not hold the public showing of His trophies until the collection is complete and polished to perfection. That is going ahead to tomorrow's verses. Sufficient for today is that you are His; you are precious in His sight; and He knows where you are!

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13:45-46

Malachi 3:17 speaks of the Lord making up His jewels (His treasured possession) and there is no doubt but that each Christian character, refined and polished, will sparkle in its own setting in the glory that is yet to be. But heaven is ordered and coherent, and each will fit into the other in a complementary way so that the whole is a perfect unity, while each part offsets the other. What brilliance! But what cost, not only to the One who sold all to purchase "the one magnificent pearl", but to each who is a part. The smooth lustre of a pearl is made by the secretion in the oyster as it seeks to heal the pain of the grain of sand. Does this not make sense of the battles and struggles of our daily experience? Polish on blessed Lord! Make me right no matter what it costs. I'd rather suffer down here and be in my right place in heaven than have it easy and be a disappointment to You in heaven. Who would want to be a second-rate jewel? Everyone would see the flaws in heaven. And they would know it was not the Master Jeweller's fault because there would be too many other examples of His work. Work on dear Lord so that one day You will hold me up with pride and satisfaction. He smiles back at such words for He knows we will be the richer and not poorer.

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13:47-52

Things will not always be hidden, for though there is a gathering in the net of many kinds of fish, there is also a separation that is accurate, severe, final and inescapable. In every fisherman's net there are always some queer, unwanted and useless fish. They were caught up in the process of gathering the net, but they had no real place. What of the householder and his treasure? The treasure was there all the time, but when admiring and appreciative friends are present he brings special items out for their pleasure. Yes, Jesus is interested in our pleasure as well as the salvation of our souls. Away with all false ideas of frustrated piety! Open your eyes to the beauties that He has made. See and savour the delights of them. God also likes them. Do the same with the Scriptures. Throw away your notebooks and pencils and read for the sheer thrill and wonder of finding Jesus, and always something new about Him. It's exciting, although you would not think it to see so many doleful Christians. It is thrilling because it is realistic, for you are always seeing some new light on yourself (shattering and humiliating at times), on the world, the past, present and future. Dull? Impossible! With this Man Jesus, you are at the heart of the control room of men and devils. What a life; and it never ends.

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13:53-58

Today's reading is like a slap in the face after yesterday's thrill. Look what they said, "Isn't this the joiner's son? Who and what is he to get all excited about? We could tell him a thing or two about living and dealing with the world's problems." Why didn't these critics bring forth better results than Jesus instead of yapping and snapping behind His back? Of course they were astonished, for things were happening before their eyes. But they were too proud to acknowledge it or Him. They were angry and offended. Ah, you say, they would oppose and hinder. No! They never got the chance. He left! That showed them of how little importance they were in God's scheme of things. It is quite amazing how God reduces things and people to their right size, and it is equally amazing how many miniatures there are, to say nothing of purely negative characters. No wonder people don't like Jesus. He is too real.

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14:1-14

We must put verses 3-12 in brackets for that is the description of the earlier dealings of Herod with John. The Baptist's preaching was with authority, interfering in people's lives in the name of God, commanding them to change, and he had no hesitation in rebuking royalty. Since they are public figures the standard is higher for them than for others, and royalty that disregards God's laws and uses the speech of the gutter stands forth as an enemy of God. Herod is by no means the only man who chooses a wanton dancer rather than a holy prophet. Neither is he the only man who gets trapped in his own weakness. He had hesitated so often and so long, trying to square his wrong attitude with the right word of the preacher that, he could not but destroy himself. Trace his spiritual dallying in Mark 6:20, followed by his treacherous selling of John for fear of another, and a woman at that! Now in our chapter his weak heart is stirred again, v.1-4 and Herod never saw Jesus again (13) until Luke 23:8-9, just prior to the Cross, but Jesus refused to speak to him. Herod always hoped things would turn out right but they never did because he was not prepared to deal honestly and change his life. You can't keep in with Jesus' friends and enemies at the same time. It can't be done!

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14:1-14

Read these verses again and compare the Herod clique in their persons, interests and attitudes to Jesus with what you read in v.13-15. There were many who were drawn to Jesus, and came from far on foot, with a wondrous compelling interest. When Jesus saw them, He was moved with care and compassion and went forth to meet them and to heal them. What a heart this Heavenly Earthly Man must have had. The Herods must have grieved Him sorely, but His care for those who sought Him was unstinted. To the one He gave Himself, while from the other He withheld Himself. The wonder of those who want Jesus only highlights the cold, barren lifelessness of those who don't. Heaven and Hell are seen together. Where do you come in to the picture? Would Jesus run from you or to-you?' He knows your heart. Do you?

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14:15-21

There is a wonderful contrast in the story of this miracle which we can neither explain nor explain away. Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, fed them all, and they were filled. That is miracle. But note the difference in Jesus' attitude to the people and the disciples. They said, "Send them away". Jesus said, "Bring them to Me." Christian service is both a thrill and a pleasure, but when we get tired, and the needs of the people get more constantly and immediately demanding, we tend to send them away. We say there is a limit to what people can expect of us. We say we have done well by them and have helped them. We say they have been taught of God, as the multitude had been. We say we have shown them the way of salvation and our duty is done. But love does not speak the language of duty. Love regards people as precious things to be cared for and ministered to with human compassion, and not merely as souls to be saved. Jesus said, "Bring them to Me," and He did not preach or teach, but fed them and eased their hunger and thirst. It was Jesus who did the deed and supplied the food. But it was the disciples who carried it to the people. There is little care in the world, and plenty harsh selfishness. See that you increase the one but not the other.

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14:22-25

There is little doubt that the miraculous feeding had aroused a great wave of enthusiasm among the people and they would have hailed Jesus as King there and then. But Jesus would have none of it. He would have had to keep pandering to their appetites, which would have grown more finicky, in order to keep them. *Disciples* are not made that way. But the twelve were impressed and enthused over this success, and had to be constrained, against their fleshly inclinations, to depart. No doubt they sulked at losing the chance to become 'big-time' leaders of a popular movement, and they had to taught a lesson. They went alone. The Master went to the secret prayer-room of the hill-side. He was at peace. They were tossed in lonely darkness and the wind was contrary and Jesus did not come to them. They were left alone with their disgruntled spirits. Now they did not look like leaders of men. It is easy to enthuse when all is with you, and to give the impression of spirituality. But when

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Jesus eventually came they failed to recognise His Person, because the storm was still there. Of course, they had not expected Him. If we could learn to see, Jesus is at the heart of many storms. They are all His!

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14:26-33

Jesus' immediate word of comfort is not to be wondered at, for, in spite of their failure to understand, they were His disciples. Although the storm was fierce these experienced fishermen who could have easily turned their boat to run before the wind to shelter, made no move to do so. Their Master had said to go to the other side, and they were going. Now comes the next miracle - not Jesus walking on the sea, but Peter. We criticise his presumption, but he seems the first to see that if Jesus can, then He can make Peter do it. This is what he says: "If it is you, bid me come." Only when told did he leave the boat, and he walked on the stormy sea just like his Master. With his eyes on the face of Jesus he seemed able to transcend human limitation. Why did he look at the storm? It was his downfall. What would you have looked at? Immediately Jesus caught him. We have no answer to Jesus' question, "Why did you doubt me?" There is no answer, for there is no reason to doubt. We are strange mortals. Will we never learn that with Jesus there are no abortive, unproductive schemes, and that to do His bidding is safety and certainty, aye, and enjoyment too, for they enjoyed the last part of the voyage.

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14:34-36

Simple verses like these are liable to be passed over, but they have a word to speak in that they reveal a singularly positive awareness of and reaction to the presence of Jesus amongst the people of Gennesaret. We read in Luke 19:44 of a people who knew not the time of their visitation and it led to their destruction. That is something often repeated to this day. There is a time of opportunity for peoples and cities which, if not grasped and used, will pass swiftly away never to return. We deceive ourselves if we make the Son of God a beggarly servant who will wait on in spite of contemptuous neglect. There is a necessary urgency which must be manifested as with the men of Gennesaret. There was a hunger, and an eagerness that is often strangely absent in many Christians. The Son of God who comes in simplicity is often unrecognised and unwelcome and His mighty works are strangled at birth by the unsubstantial faith of those who ought to know better. When Jesus crossed the sea to Gadara the eyes of the people were so full of pigs that they asked Jesus to leave. Many eyes are so full of concocted schemes and pet hobbies that Jesus Christ the Son of God can find no entrance. But here they sensed that a new thing had happened among them and they grasped their chance and saw miracle upon miracle. It was all so easy. But then it is so when Jesus is recognised as the Master and not the servant.

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15:1-9

Ponder this very carefully so that the blackness of religious hearts and the duplicity of formal religion may be seen. There had been a succession of mighty miracles as well as mighty words from the lips of Jesus. It could scarcely be denied that God was with this man. But a deputation was sent from Jerusalem to complain about the ceremonial washing of hands. This is nothing but blind prejudice. The Pharisees had gone their own barren and dead religious way for years. It was futile and increasingly less acceptable to the common people. Tradition anchored them to their own dead past and they sought to enslave others. If *they* did something it was right, regardless of what God said. Then when Jesus came with the fresh air of reality and vitality they considered it a draught to be excluded at all costs. They found their chance in the non-conformity of the disciples, and became passionately Indignant about something that did not really matter, while at the same time they ignored God. Jesus told them to their faces what they were. Hypocrites!

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15:1-9

Holy talk can often be an escape from rightful moral duties, but fancy religious words strung together is never acceptable by God as an alternative to plain duty. Here men said of certain money that it was a gift, that is, dedicated to God, and for that reason left their parents in need. Jesus says that is fraud. In like manner many

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Christians hold tightly on to their money on the pretext that they are stewarding it for God. To steward means to use and distribute wisely. Jesus' idea of worship is very practical. He will not accept custom, nor habit, nor inclination, nor preference. The heart of worship is the commandment of God, and if that be ignored or supplanted in the life then all the performance of religion is vain and unacceptable to God. It is easy to speak the language of holiness and to give the impression of great sanctity, albeit a cold and unattractive sanctity. But to obey God is better than any sacrifice (1 Sam.15:22) and the truer a man's holiness is, the less will be his holy talk. He will be much more human, and much easier to live with.

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15:10-20

To divide these verses into sections would be to lose the surge of the point blank challenge and rebuke that Jesus uttered. The disciples seemed to think it important to pacify the Pharisees and keep their approval, as if these men had some significance in God's work. They were quite irrelevant, except in an evil way, for they were to bring about the death of Jesus. Verses 13-14 reveal the stark realism of Jesus. It may have been a time when the criticism and opposition of these men was virulent and hateful, and the disciples were fearful of the issue. Jesus told the disciples to leave them alone to draw others into blind confusion. He told them that what was of His Father cannot be destroyed by such pathetic tools of the devil. He said that every poisonous plant, attractive though it be and praiseworthy in man's eyes, if it be not planted by His Father would be rooted up. Note that this word of denunciation was not uttered in secret but to the multitude. The real message of all this is that Jesus did not allow the hurtful words of these "holy" critics to distract Him from what He was doing. He had a work to do given Him by God the Father. It was a work always spoken against, never carrying the approval of crowds or well-known religious leaders; but God was in it and the work remains until this very day. Jesus' last word tells that we must learn to distinguish the things that really matter. Reality has a permanence.

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15:21-28

Who are the outsiders and who the insiders? It depends entirely on your standpoint of testing. The scribes we have been reading of were inside by *their* estimation, but the woman here, in the end of the story, is found commended whereas the others were roundly condemned and left. It seems that Jesus spoke sternly, even harshly to the woman. But she was insistent and persistent until even the disciples would have granted her request just to get peace. But Jesus knew what He was doing. A stern message does not frighten people away as some claim. It sifts the hearts of the hearers and the shallow disappear, but the real persist. There is no reaction of offence in the woman's heart. The more Jesus points out her total undeservingness the more she agrees. Would God we had more of this kind of persistent searching for Jesus. But why does Jesus speak thus in v.24? Judgment begins with God's chosen and privileged people. Revival is the bringing back to full awakensness of life in God's own people. But how often we see someone coming from afar and showing greater desire than those of many years of church-going. God looks for workers, and is not afraid to leave behind those who are only interested in playing Christian games.

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15:29-31

Have you ever considered the nature of the congregations Jesus had? They were always those who had a need, whether physical, mental, emotional, psychological or spiritual. As well as teaching them spiritual truth, or rather, *as* He taught them such truth, He brought healing to their lives. That makes a congregation something akin to a hospital, and a gathering of casualties will never be very impressive to the world's eyes, so much so that they will in all probability despise it. Then again, since healing takes time, there is unlikely to be such a mass instantaneous demonstration of power as in our verses for today. But, if at some given time, in heaven for example, all the people who had found the healing and restoring touch of God on their lives in a certain congregation were gathered together in one company, there might well be gasps of astonishment. (Not least from the minister!) There might also be a great many heads hanging in shame (if these critics are there at all) because in its earthly day they despised and opposed the place and the people by whose instrumentality this

wondrous work was done. Far better to see and glorify God on earth. Judge nothing before the time (1 Cor.4:5). You might well be wrong.

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15:32-39

This is a different miracle from that in chapter 14. The earlier feeding was among Hebrew people within the borders of their land. This takes place among the Gentiles in Decapolis. A different word for basket is used in each account, and again the distinction is maintained by Jesus' use of different words in chapter 16:9-10. Here we have the crowd hungry after accompanying with Jesus three days. That was a really long sermon! But Jesus was not forgetful of their human needs, for He knows the frailty of the human frame and how men's thoughts and reactions become warped and unbalanced by hunger and tiredness. This is something we must remember, because our service to others need not always be 'spiritual'. A bowl of soup on a winter's day can touch a heart better than a tract. The marvel here is that the disciples, who so little time ago had been the instruments to carry bread to a greater company, now manifest continued unbelief. How can it be done, they said. With God, nothing shall be impossible. When will we learn?

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16:1-4

The Pharisees and Sadducees were, by conviction, enemies of each other because one believed in the Resurrection of the dead and the other did not. But they were prepared to sink their differences in common enmity to Jesus. This is very common. If the word of Jesus does not make converts it makes bitter enemies who, blind to all other considerations, will persecute both Christ and His people with relentless hatred. This is not to be wondered at because the word of Jesus discovers and reveals their basic dishonesty and fraudulent religious pretensions. Now, no person likes to be exposed, except where there is a genuine desire to be right with God through and through. On the face of it these men were genuine, desiring a sign from heaven so that they might find it possible to believe in Jesus. His answer was that they should look around them, use their eyes and their brains, see what was happening and come to the only honest conclusion, that God was in fact working amongst them. But there are none so blind as those who refuse to see, and because these men were not honest, because their religion was a game, because they had no real intention of obeying God, Jesus left them.

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16:5-12

How dull of understanding can people become? Jesus is astonished at the slowness of the disciples to grasp the meaning and significance of His words, especially the words of warning. Their thoughts were petty and small. They thought Jesus was getting at them for some little thing they had forgotten, and they had to be told in simplest language that they had to guard against any resistance to the truth in their hearts because that, together with an outward semblance of obedience, is a double life which ultimately destroys. We marvel at the patience of Jesus with these disciples and we could do with similar grace in our dealings with our fellows. But never forget, although there is much patience with genuine weakness and stumbling, Jesus will not be held back in the progress of His holy purposes by weakness that is the result of trifling. Lift up your eyes from preoccupation with your own little schemes and fantasies and see the broad plan of God's warfare. Now lose yourself in that, and you will begin to find yourself. It will be hard work but it is infinitely better than enfeebling daydreaming.

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16:13-20

Jesus probes beneath the uncertainty of the disciples to force them to give expression to their faith so that it might be deepened. It is interesting that none of the disciples told Jesus the wicked things people said of His person and ministry, when some had plainly said He had a devil. There is little point in passing on that kind of thing, and people usually do it inspired by the devil and with a desire to hurt. Perhaps these men saw in Jesus' eyes the cost of His ministry and would spare Him. Note the wideness of description. The ministry of Jesus called his hearers to repentance like John the Baptist had done. Jesus challenged people to obedience as Elijah

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had done. And with the fire of these men there was also the tenderness and sadness over sin as in Jeremiah. Then Peter spoke for all the disciples when he gave his answer to Jesus. This was God-given revelation. The eyes of their understanding had been opened to receive things that merely natural men can neither see nor receive. This is the wonder and mystery of every conversion. God alone does it. But every revelation of God and all the blessing of privilege are to equip for service, which service, as we shall see, is like unto the pattern of Christ.

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16:13-20

The Rock is Christ and not Peter. Christ is both foundation and chief corner stone of the building that is the Church. Now, note this for our encouragement. Christ says 'I will build my Church'. The gates of hell, whatever we mean by such a description of evil powers, may hurl themselves against Christ's holy Church but shall not prevail. Be clear that the word means more. The true Church, which is the body of Christ, is not on the defensive. With the fury of men and devils raging and striking to hurt, yes, with many faithful warriors wounded and slain, the holy work of God moves relentlessly on to its fore-ordained end. As the clamour of evil increases in our own day we may well think it is because the powers of evil sense (we are not sure how much they know) that their time is running short (Rev.12:12). Be quite sure from this word that evil men with their evil words and works will surely fall and bite the dust before the feet of the all-conquering Jesus. On that day, with the pain gone but scars still showing, the faithful servants of God shall be led along in the triumphal procession of Christ (2 Cor.2:14).

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16:21-23

The previous verses about the keys of the kingdom have often been grossly misapplied and need to be kept in close contact with v.23. What was given to Peter and the other disciples (18:18) seems to be a right to discipline within the fellowship of believers which is the Church. In the realm of preaching, Christ ratifies that which is done in His name and by His command. However we understand the keys of the kingdom, there is tremendous responsibility to be and to do right. Then when Jesus began to reveal how the work is done, by suffering, dying, death and rejection, Peter cries in protest. He is holding out for victory without suffering, and resurrection without death. That is devil's doctrine. Only those who bear the cross, may hope to wear the glorious crown. This lays severe challenge to many professed conversions, when people hold hope of salvation while their lives evidence nothing of discipleship. A decision made in some moment of crisis long ago is not sufficient warrant for calling yourself a Christian. To preach an easy Gospel, a cheap grace, and a soft way, is doing devil's work and all such are cast behind Jesus' back, however prominent they be in the eyes of men.

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16:24-28

What could be plainer than these verses? To deny one's self is to give up our self-determining will in order to do Christ's bidding step by step. To take up the cross is to commit one's self to a life like Jesus, despised, rejected by men, and by oft repeated circumstances be delivered up unto death (2 Cor.4:7-12). There is no praise in it, for it is the death of the Cross which is shame. Jesus is spoken of as suffering outside the camp (Heb.13:11-14 AV). It means to be held of no reputation amongst men, but it also means to save your life instead of losing it. The whole world's riches possessed (and few ever get near that wealth) is a poor bargain for the soul. Yet people sell their souls for much less, for a place in the clique of social climbers. But there is a harvest for each to reap, and there is not much time left. Don't wait until your minister is whispering to your relatives at the side of your dying bed. You will have no energy then to start searching for Christ, and forgiveness and eternal life. Now is the accepted time. Now is also the time for many converted folk to stop frittering away their precious days. Do you want to be poor in heaven?

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17:1-6

Six days after Peter's great confession and equally great rebuke, and in relation to Jesus' words about his death, three favoured disciples were taken up into the mountain by Jesus. There, as He prayed (Luke 9:29), He was transfigured and His whole person shone with a radiant glory that awed and frightened the men. It was a glory shining from Him and not down upon Him. It was a glory that was always there but usually veiled in His flesh. It was the glory of perfect humanity. And as God looked down upon Jesus, he saw a man, a perfect man, a man who knew and tasted all that is involved in human life yet without sin, a man who by virtue of his human perfection could have passed there and then into the glory of the presence of God, a man as God had purposed in the beginning, and God was pleased. The disciples saw, and never forgot. John says, 'We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father' (John 1:14 AV and RSV). Peter says, 'We were eye-witnesses of His majesty' (2 Pet. 1:16-18). This is the One who was to be seen later in such awful carnage on the Cross, the man Christ Jesus, the Lord of Glory: This is the thought that made Paul gasp out, 'He loved me, and gave Himself for me!' (Gal.2:20). It is staggering. What a blessed and tremendous substitution. Shame on us that we think so little of it.

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17:1-8

They saw no man save Jesus only, and when they eventually opened their eyes he looked ordinary again. But the disciples would never regard Him as ordinary again. Their eyes had been opened to see. Neither would they forget that this all-glorious Jesus had spoken to them, stumbling disciples that they were, bewildered by the vastness of the thing that had touched their lives. And when He spoke, He touched them and told them not to be afraid. In those moments bowed in trembling fear when they heard the voice of God they had been gripped by a sense of failure as well as fear, but when they lifted up their eyes they found themselves looking right into the kind and gentle eyes of Jesus, eyes that already showed some of the deep agony that was to come. They had seen Him in the beauty of His person, the wonder of His glory, and were to see Him in the brokenness of the Cross. We have all three in the scriptures and it is strange that we spend such little time thinking of Him. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full on His wonderful face. Who is He? The Lord, the King of Glory. That life given up was the price of your salvation.

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17:1-13

Read the whole account and with the help of Luke 9 consider Moses and Elijah, lawgiver and prophet of the old economy. They spoke of Jesus' death; the word for death is the word exodus; and it was a death to be accomplished not just endured. This death was the central focus of the mount of Transfiguration, and not the glory. The Cross was not to be a defeat but a victory over all sin and death and hell. The whole of the Old Testament had spoken beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow (1 Pet.1:11). Now the time of fulfilment was at hand, and the two representatives of the Old Testament and of all who had died in faith in the promise of a Saviour, had come to speak to Jesus in thrilling anticipation of the hour of triumph. But what a burden on the heart of our Lord. What weight of responsibility and the three who here saw the glory were the same three who failed to watch with Jesus in Gethsemane. Their last question concerning the reference to Elijah in Malachi 4:5-6 is used by Jesus to turn their thoughts again to the fact of suffering. This is how the work is to be done. It was so with Jesus. It will be so with us.

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17:14-18

We are reading here of a lunatic boy tormented by an evil spirit. What a contrast to the picture of glory on the mountain! Gathered round the boy was a group of well meaning people, all of whom were quite powerless to do anything to help. There was no answer to the cries of the young boy nor the sobs of his father until Jesus came. What if He had not come down from the glory above? What if He had come only to those who were worthy and deserving? What if He had dwelt on earth in the full blaze of His glory so that people could only hide their eyes and fear? What if He had been found only amongst the people of high places and in the midst of crowds? What

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of the lepers who longed for the touch of His hand? What of the blind whose ears strained to catch the sound of His coming footsteps? What of the lost, the lonely, the dying, the prodigals, the sin-soiled, the hungry-hearted, the tormented? What if Jesus had not come? But this is what Christmas is all about. He did come, and “a stable place sufficed the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ” (Rossetti). That is why people failed to see and recognise Him. He was too low down!

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17:19-21

From the high peaks of thrill and expectation we return to the grim realities of need and failure in the valley of human life. The real test of our communion with the Lord of glory is in the ordinary situations of human need, and the disciples were found wanting. The man expected them to be able to help, and their manifest inability must have been a barrier to his believing in Jesus. When the cure was effected the disciples asked Jesus a straight question and got a straight answer that scarcely needs comment. They could not help the young man because they had no faith; and they had no faith because they did not pray. There can be no quibbling about this, because Jesus said it. If we are to meet the needs of people we must first turn away from them to God. If we are to be the channels whereby the power of God reaches and releases lives young and old from tormenting powers, then we must know the kind of fasting which entails the setting aside of all personal likes, rights and inclinations to a place secondary to the will of God and the work of God as far as our time, energy and effort are concerned. The Church well deserves the rebuke, “I brought him to your disciples and they could not cure him”.

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17:22-23

Jesus and His disciples stayed for a season in quietness in Galilee and in those days He took them back to the point where their faith failed. He told them over and over again the fact of the coming suffering and death as the way by which His work would be accomplished. But the disciples could not or would not see it. We are very like them. We say to God to use us for His glory and we mean it. Then when He does use us, by the only fruitful way known, and we have to drink constantly of the cup of pain, suffering, rejection and death, we cry to God asking why people will not heed us, why there is no vindication. If God had delivered Jesus from the Cross; if there had been no cry 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' there would have been no salvation for sinners. This is the pattern. It is death; oft repeated death; a cross agonizing our feelings and hopes; people mocking and trampling over us leaving us for dead. But here is the wonder. We do not die. We live. We are not poor, for through us many are made rich. It is miracle, but it is fact (2 Cor.4:6-12). The disciples were cast down, but when the truth of this dawned upon their souls they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus' sake.

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17:24-27

The significance of this incident is that Jesus submits Himself to this matter of paying tribute money for one reason only, namely that His rightful refusal might well have caused some who heard His word to stumble in unbelief or lack of understanding. The half shekel of tribute or tax was payable to the temple authorities and not to the civil power of Rome. It was the symbolic atonement money spoken of in Exodus 30:11-16. The temple rulers came asking in a critical way if the disciples teacher (master) was proposing to evade his religious responsibility. The criticism is evident in the negative form of their question. Peter's answer showed his unbelief continuing in spite of the earlier wonders and rebuke. But he was anticipated or forestalled by Jesus in the house. Before Peter could speak he was challenged. The atonement money was given to the temple and thus given to God. But since Jesus was the Son of God was there any such claim on Him or on those who had believed in Him? The greater and prior claim of Jesus cancels out the lesser which had in fact become more a human institution than a holy service. Then, having established His rightful liberty, Jesus submits Himself, and Peter with Him for the sake of others. Not to be ministered unto but to minister is the abiding principle of all service (Mk.10:45). It is humbling to Peter's pride and ours, but it is the way of fruitfulness.

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18:1-6

The unbelief of Jesus' own disciples now manifests itself in the appalling pride of their hearts as they wrangle as to place and position in the Kingdom. The bitterness of mutual recrimination drives them to ask a verdict from Jesus. In answer Jesus sets an unselfconscious child in the midst and tells them that unless they become like this, and set the sword of the Lord to the unholy self-centredness of their hearts they would not even enter the Kingdom. The further down a man goes, in genuine as opposed to pietistic .humility, the greater that man will be. But Jesus presses the message even further. The man of childlike and submissive trusting heart serves in the kingdom. But the man, a Christian man like the disciples, who by cursed pride and exaltation of heart causes any little one to stumble in its journey to Jesus, would have more profit eternally if he were taken out of the way and drowned. There is a self-will at work in many Christian hearts that is building up an avalanche of disorder in this life and loss in the next. Beware!

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18:7-9

Jesus is far more real and radical than we are with regard to the costly surrenders that are part and parcel of Christian discipleship. He states quite categorically that there will always be offences, that is occasions and temptations which can draw us away from God. Therefore we need to be on guard since we have been warned. At the first sign of the cancerous evil of sin, cut it out and cast it from you, for it has the fire of hell concealed within its fleshly attractiveness. We should all recognise and remember our danger areas and it is to our everlasting shame that we spend so much time "sailing near the wind". Be quite sure if you do you will sooner or later end on the rocks. But what of our effect on others? Think of the epitaphs left on record concerning many of the kings of Israel: "They made Israel to sin". Woe to the man or woman who lives to work such harm on the children of God for he destroys himself and his fellows. All this began with Jesus speaking of the pride and ambition that lie in uncrucified Christian hearts!

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18:10-14

Never undervalue and never set any cause of stumbling or hindrance in the path of a man or woman, young or old, when they show signs of wanting to follow Christ. Every single one of them is infinitely precious in the eyes of the Lord who came to seek and to save. Remember that your children will watch you and grow up to be like you. Your life in your own home is the constant sermon that they hear. Think of all the things parents encourage their children to learn and pursue. Yet how seldom do we find parents encouraging their children to give their hearts to Jesus and serve Him with an even greater abandon than they give to the world. It is not surprising that most of the young people of a congregation disappear when they reach their teens. They are following their elders, with this difference: older folk retain a formal faith by accepted Sunday morning attendance, but young folk see no point in observing such a hypocritical formula. At the end of a year that cannot be recalled and with a new year opening before us, we need to be recalled to our vows of love to Jesus and loyalty of service, and our promise at many, many baptisms that by prayer, precept and example we would lead our children to Jesus. Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. (Eccles.5:4-7)

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18:15-17

The New Year (when these notes were first written) begins with a word which, if obeyed, could well heal many a long standing breach between friends and families. Go and speak to them. At once the pride rises in our hearts protesting that the breach was not caused by us. Maybe not, but it is difficult to have a one-sided quarrel. This is the kind of thing which grows rather than decreases when it is left alone, therefore make the move to heal the bonds of fellowship. What, am I my brother's keeper? Yes! If your brother sins against you or anyone else he is hurt, you are hurt and the fellowship is hurt. Ill-feeling divides the camp into sides, and the offender becomes sullen and stubborn, justifying himself, and the offended one becomes bitter. How long will this go on? Until you go and begin the work of reconciliation. It is not your fault? Would you be like Jesus? Go privately. Go

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with wise and trusted companions. Go with the whole fellowship for the thing has assumed hellish dimensions. You may be rebuffed. The whole thing may be denied. You may be ridiculed. Jesus suffered all that, sometimes from us. But if you are successful, you have gained a brother. See ye to it!

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18:18-20

The first verse is difficult and must never be taken out of context to justify a church or priesthood exercising a tyranny of power over the lives and souls of others. But speaking here to His own disciples Jesus says that as they go on being and doing in faithfulness what God requires of them God Himself will be with them. God will be with them in their words and works, doing things, binding and loosing for time and eternity. It is God who is active, not any man. If that be so how tremblingly we should live lest the intrusion of carnal and fleshly desires and motives silence the voice of God that speaks to people through our faltering lips. Read the early verses of 2 Corinthians 4, or the whole chapter for that matter, and let the burden of it drive you to your knees, for then you will find yourself in the heart of the other verses of today's section. Prayer. It is prayer that makes a gathering of people into a Church. It is in prayer we share the burden of the Church's evangelism. Prayer is evangelism shorn of all its fleshly attractions. Prayer is costly for it is in the name of Jesus, that is in a sharing of the life of Jesus that seeks not to be ministered to but to give up its life in costly dying so that sinners might be saved. It is in such God-glorifying work that Jesus is found in fellowship with His people.

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18:21-22

Make two verses sufficient for today to ask ourselves quite simply how much we know and to what extent do we practise forgiveness. Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors. But if God kept strictly to our request how different our lives would be. We can sometimes think we forgive but do it with a grudge or with a word or look of contempt. We make the other person feel an utter heel if we possibly can, and every time our paths cross the memory of past incidents is revived so that as long as we live our brother will draw back within his own thoughts and feelings because although we say we have forgiven, we have not forgotten. That is the kind of spirit that really knows nothing about forgiveness. It counts the number of times it forgives. It tells other people how kind it has been to such and such a person and how ungrateful he has been for the words of forgiveness. It speaks and speaks again until the man's whole congregation knows his sin, greatly magnified, so that the unfeeling heart of the sanctimonious "forgiver" might bask in its bigness and generosity. That is the spirit of Hell, and its actions punish instead of forgive. Read Psalm 103:10, emphasizing the word "us".

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18:21-35

With yesterday's introduction read the whole passage. It is a simple story. It asks how much you yourself have been forgiven by God, and when you answer that it was a debt you could not possibly repay, the Lord of forgiveness challenges you and asks why and on what grounds you go and take the other fellow by the throat in merciless revenge. There are those who feel it their Christian duty to ferret out all the wrong there might be in another Christian's past life, but that is evidence of a diseased mind let alone a corrupted spirit. It is an offence to all right thinking people as in this passage (31). AND it brings to the cruel, hurtful person who perpetrates such a ghastly crime against grace and humanity, the anger of the Lord who will not relent till the last penny has been paid. There is far too much talk about easy forgiveness. If the grace we claim to have saved our souls does not begin to impart grace to our lives there is but one conclusion. Whatever experience we may have had, however glib our holy language, there is no grace in us, we are still in our sins and by our denial of forgiveness to our brother (usually in the name of holy zeal) we are treasuring up rightful and wrathful judgment against ourselves. Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Read Matthew 6:14-15, then this passage again, and let God's Word speak to you for comfort or warning.

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19:1-2

These two verses are full of suggestion. Jesus had said earlier in chapter 16 that He must go to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed and here we see Him progressing steadily along the way. Nothing could deter Him or turn Him away. Yet when the people milled around Him, drawn as it were by an invisible magnetism, out of the constraining agony of His heart as He approached His passion He had time for the broken and derelict. They had nothing to commend them, nothing to offer Him, and their present praise might well turn to derision and rejection. But He healed them out of the unfailing power of His compassion. The lack of details in no way detracts from the awareness of the greatness of Jesus. Here is where we fail in our apprehension. We have sentimentalised Jesus into a lovely story that fascinates the little children. We must never deny the sweetness of our blessed Lord, but at the same time we must never forget His mighty strength. Here is a Man set on the will of the Father; a man prepared to say to all who would keep Him back that they are of the Devil. These two thoughts are not contradictory but complementary. There is more than a suggestion here that there are phases in Jesus' work, and when that work is done He moves on to the next stage. He is too serious to trifle and delay. Would God we were more like Him.

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19:3-9

Something of the background of this passage is seen in that even the disciples had low thoughts about the sanctity of marriage. But note that the question was not genuine. Those who asked were not seeking truth but angled for a means of trapping Jesus. It was what we call a leading question, but those who fence with God seldom come off best. This debate takes place within Herod's territory and jurisdiction. He had put away his wife for another woman and when John rebuked him, the preacher was executed. This is the game here. Get Jesus to speak, then get Him embroiled with the authorities and His ministry will collapse. But God-given, God-ordained, God-blessed ministries don't collapse as easily as all that. Jesus pursues the "line of argument" that is always valid and binding and turns His questioners to the Scriptures they professed to know and accept. From these Scriptures He speaks with authority, yielding not one inch to their arguments of expediency and convenience. He goes right back to the story of creation and the Garden of Eden, and on the basis of Scripture that people so often reject, the Son of God speaks, and His speech slashes through the trappings of accepted opinions and declares the standard of God. This is true preaching.

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19:3-9

One school of Jewish Rabbis interpreted Moses' word in Deut.24:1-4 in a very liberal way, allowing divorce on almost any ground, while another school allowed it only on the ground of adultery. In answering both Jesus raises the thought of marriage and declares it a gift from God, who gives or withholds in order to help man to reach and fulfil his spiritual destiny. Every part of life, including marriage, is given us for this holy purpose and never to be considered as our own and solely for our own pleasure. We belong to God who made us. All the hungers of the human heart are satisfied, not in our grasping at the gifts of God, but in our doing the will of God. In any case, there is no full and final satisfaction here on earth and therein lies the self-destroying folly of the scramble and disgrace of the divorce courts. Jesus declares here the permanence of the marriage bond in one flesh, and what God has joined together, no man has power or authority to divide. Moses' law was a concession to the hard hearts of fallen humanity and was designed to safeguard the partner in a marriage from harsh injustice. Jesus here refuses to countenance remarriage of divorced persons, and when we complain at the high standard we need to look at the social and family chaos in the whole of society that has resulted from our departure from God's standard for God's institution of marriage.

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19:10-12

Even the disciples seem to feel this is too much to ask of anyone. The thought of committing themselves to one partner for life seems hard to them and they make a sweeping statement of generalisation as we also are apt to do. Note that Jesus neither rebukes nor contradicts them for He too believes that marriage must be entered upon

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thoughtfully, reverently and in the fear of God because of what it involves. Marriage brings responsibility and restriction as well as personal pleasure and wellbeing. In Christian life and service it can narrow down (or extend) the field of possibility and Jesus speaks to the heart. There are some who by nature from birth and by no known fault of their own will never marry. Such have a particular compensation from God in their natural sensitivity and loneliness of heart. Some by the compulsion and demands of their human situation will not have the opportunity for marriage. Some, for the sake of the call of God and the work of the Kingdom, will forego the opportunity of marriage or the privilege of parenthood. Let every person be willing to receive this word and submit to the governance of God in the disposing of their life. This is both healthy and safe.

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19:13-15

Immediately after His words on marriage and divorce Jesus speaks of the children and we know only too much of the tragic emotional and moral problems that are the direct inheritance of homes where parents were so selfish or so mixed up themselves that their children had to bear a burden of sadness and responsibility which found no easing until the child, grown to early adulthood, found ease in Jesus Christ. But here, the parents brought their children to Jesus, or perhaps it was the grandparents, the neighbours or even their Sunday School teachers who brought them. There is no doubt that one of the greatest influences we have to fight against in our work among the children is the influence of the home. You see the light of love for Jesus Christ dawning in a young person's eyes and you have great hopes. Then the child is not at Sunday School because the parents have decided on a Sunday picnic. Neither child nor parents are in Church because the parents have gone visiting. The child is encouraged by parents who enthuse over sport, dancing, dramatics and any other pursuit, but not the Christian Gospel and faith. The result is that the heart of the child is led to worship Mammon instead of Jesus. Little wonder there is juvenile delinquency; and it is not modern circumstances that are to blame, but modern parents.

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19:13-15

Jesus laid His hands on them and blessed them (cf. Mark 10:16). This is what the parents desired when they brought their children, because for them it was a sign of God's blessing, and the complaining disciples were rebuked for their hindering activities. Jesus blessed the children. Is this simply a way of speaking such as we use when we say 'bless you' - an expression of goodwill and nothing more? If the Scriptures say that Jesus blessed them, then we must recognise that something happened to them, these children were blessed and lastingly. It is not too much to say that grace must have brooded over them from that day and brought them in the fulness of time into the kingdom of God. If this is so, it was without personal faith on *their* part. Indeed it was because they were blessed that faith could at last draw them in. That is the true Biblical order, grace first, then faith, and if this be so, then Infant Baptism is established as valid, and as being founded on a truly Biblical principle, for the sacrament administered to children is a standing witness to the priority of grace in the soul's salvation. God does not wait for faith before He blesses us; He did not wait for faith before He sent His Son into the world. It was before we were even born that the work of redemption was completed by God in Christ's death and resurrection. Rightly understood infant Baptism is thoroughly Biblical and a glorious, blessed and effectual means of grace.

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19:16-22

This man had everything. He was rich, young, a ruler, a man of position and character. He was educated, knew the Scriptures, and lived a good moral life. But he came to Jesus because in spite of all he had, he did not have the one thing he really hungered for, namely the awareness, the assurance and possession of life that was eternal. His whole life was anchored in and determined by material and human considerations of this present life. He looked upon the salvation of his soul as something to be tagged on to the existing pattern and clutter of his life. But that can never be, and when Jesus laid bare the challenge of discipleship and with it the basic self-centeredness of the man's life, it proved to be too much. Sell all you have, said Jesus, and the man might well have coped with that, but Jesus went on to say "Follow Me". It was a call to yield himself to be mastered from

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then on by Jesus, to be a nothing as Jesus was, to be an outcast from society with its pleasures and toys, and to be a disciple. He went away, and Jesus allowed him to go. He went back to his sticks and stones and bank balances and when death would separate him from these he would be left with nothing. What an opportunity Jesus gave him, and what a blind, un-businesslike decision. There was no profit, ever!

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19:23-26

Jesus now comments on the incident of the ruler, and his word is very straight. It is hard for a man who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed it is well-nigh impossible (24). Why should this be so? If a man is rich, taking the word in its widest sense, if a man has all he feels he needs to make life worthwhile, and if that man feels he can quickly and easily say that he has kept to God's satisfaction all the commandments (20), and if he feels there is only something small or formal lacking which he would remedy in a moment (20), then such a man will never have anything of the sense of need for forgiveness and renewal by grace which is the beginning of the way that leads into the kingdom of God. The kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit (Matt.5:3), those with a sense of need. But it needs a humble heart to confess that of and by itself a sense of need or a wish for heaven is not enough. This is the pride that keeps so very many from seeking a Saviour. They would rather save themselves by trying hard and doing good works. But with man, from man, by the effort of man, no man shall be saved (Rom3:19-20AV; Gal.2:16). But with God, who plants His Spirit and life in the heart of a sinner who penitently confesses his need there is life that is indeed eternal. Let none think that conversion is *one* of the ways to be a Christian and all the other human designs are leading the same way. There is only one way to the kingdom and it is the way of God-given forgiveness and God-honouring discipleship (John 14:6).

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19:27-30

Have you ever noticed how intently Peter must have listened to every word spoken by Jesus. He saw here a comparison. He and his fellow disciples were being instructed in the costliness of discipleship and it was weighing heavily on their hearts. Now he hears Jesus promising treasure in heaven to the young ruler and at once he asks the question so naturally expressed in v.27. It certainly seems that Peter compared himself and his fellow-disciples favourably with the ruler. Jesus' answer is a warning as well as an encouragement. Everyone who has suffered for Jesus' sake shall receive abundant reward in this life and the next. cf. Mark 10:30. But the joys are mingled with pain, for it is only as we plumb the depths of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings that we drink from the well of fellowship and blessing. The two go together and we shall never come to a point when we have only one of them. If we suffer for being bad, then we shall have no gracious compensation. But if the hardness comes to us through faithfulness to Jesus then, unless Jesus is a liar, there will be the delightful fruits that are found nowhere else. But be careful about giving yourself a place and calculating your dividends. It may be that others have sunk their capital more absolutely in Jesus and they will be before you.

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20:1-16

This is the third and final point of the lesson drawn from the incident with the young ruler. We first guard against wrong understanding. This is not a parable to teach that all will be equal in heaven, nor does it teach that men work and earn heaven. Nor does it defend equal pay for unequal work. The parable teaches concerning service and its reward which is not according to length of time but according to faithfulness in using the time that is given. This is a comfort to those who are converted later in life. There is no justification of those who loiter through life and waste God-given opportunity. For such there is loss that cannot be regained. These men, when the opportunity came to them, grasped it with eagerness, as many an older person has grasped at Jesus. How wonderful it is to hear some say that they give themselves so eagerly to the study of the Scriptures because they have no time to waste because life is running out so quickly. They will have their full reward. Some of the first labourers were discontented on pay day, forgetting that it was all of the benevolence of the Master that they were in His service at all. Many are called, but few retain that humility of heart that enables the Lord to entrust them with long continued, much blessed, service. Be in earnest!

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20:17-19

For the third time in this record of the Gospel Jesus speaks directly to his disciples concerning the Cross (16:21, 17:22) and each time He declares the fact of the resurrection. On the first occasion Peter swept away such a thought. The second time they were all sorry, and this time we shall see their unchanged attitude in the next verses. But here we are to note the tremendous assurance of Jesus concerning what was to be, and this knowledge added to the burden He bore. The further on He went the greater grew the awareness of the forces of enmity and the intensity of the conflict, but He never wavered. The pattern of Christian service is like this and Jesus takes His men apart to teach them that it would be so. The whole world order would be against them; a traitor amongst the disciples would betray Him; the ecclesiastical powers would hate, revile and reject, and the civil power would see nothing of God in it at all and would carry out the sentence unto death. Is that all there is to this glorious thing we call Christian service? No, indeed. That is just the death and dying part which is ours to do. God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection is God's part. "As dying and behold we live". (2 Cor.6:4-10). Men are always waiting (some gleefully) for our downfall. But God! Yes, But God has another thought and deed.

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20:20-23

These are deep waters and we study slowly and carefully. While they were all pondering Jesus' words, seeking to grasp their meaning, there came this manifestation of deep, self-seeking pride. All the disciples were angry (24), but we cannot think it was righteous anger. Rather it was the anger of those who feel they have been beaten into second place. Something of the depth of this pride is seen in that Peter, who is usually found along with James and John, is left out. Then the mother is seen, and who can say but that her ravenous pride for glory in the persons of her sons was the driving factor in this request. (Did the sons know what their mother was going to do?) There was enough potential envy here to blast asunder the fellowship of the twelve disciples and thus to bring irreparable damage to the instruments and work of the Lord. We are on holy ground here, right at the heart of God's work of redemption and that is where the enemy seeks to strike. Ponder this word carefully and prayerfully lest you be found giving way to such a hellish spirit of pride. Remember that these two men were later in the garden with Jesus, and they fell asleep!

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20:20-23

There is still a comforting word to be found in this passage. Jesus has been laying before His disciples the way of fruitful service. It is the way of costly suffering. Granted that the disciples did not yet grasp His meaning, but there is a reaction in these two men that is encouraging, and that Jesus is pleased to receive. He speaks three times. Are you able to drink this cup? He thus checks and challenges them with a reminder of the cup and the baptism of suffering that pained His heart as it approached. (Lk.12:50) The immediate response testifies that they had no real idea of what they were letting themselves in for. But who does, when first converted? Would we not have had second thoughts if we had known the cost of the way of Christ? Thank God for ministers who never beguiled us into thinking the way would be easy! But the disciples' answer also held evidence of a desire not to be left out of this mighty thing Jesus was doing. They felt an impelling constraint in their hearts as they committed themselves, albeit so lacking in understanding. And Jesus third word was "You shall drink!" They were accepted, but no promise of special place was given. That is in the hand of the Father, and disciples do well to concentrate on faithfulness, for therein is the essence of place and reward. These two men often failed, but never went back.

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20:24-28

There is that in each of us that wants to be big, and it is a sign of our essential smallness and insecurity that we are so preoccupied. A really "big" man needs not to go around constantly tending the garden of his popularity lest any prize blossom has faded overnight. Real bigness forgets about itself, just as real conviction does not bother defending its statements, it just makes them. These words of Jesus are very plain and made a real and

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lasting impression at least on Peter (cf. 1 Peter 5:1-7). The ways of the world and the ways of Christ are altogether different. They lord it; you be servants. You pour out; God will fill. You yield up your life to be slandered and slaughtered for the sake of people who neither deserve nor appreciate it. You are humbled; God will exalt. And when your heart and mine complain, read v.28. Even Jesus, yes, even Jesus, became a servant. Would you go a different way?

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20:29-34

There are many lessons here, not least the revelation that the crowd is often very far from being right. They overvalued their own importance and as a result they would have dismissed these crying nuisances who were disturbing their enjoyment of one of Jesus' sermons. Would God our services were more disturbed by this kind of miracle. But perhaps the two blind men would be chased out because they were sitting in our pew. Our seat indeed! It is God's house, not ours. But through the babble of the crowd, who were not interested in any vital way, Jesus heard the imploring and insistent cry of the two men. He stopped, and He spoke and He healed. Dare we tarry longer? Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem and would never pass that way again. A moment's opportunity and the men grasped it. When their eyes were opened the first person they saw was Jesus. Perhaps it was gratitude, perhaps a sense of His commandingly gracious person, perhaps some other reason, but they followed Him, and when Christ's final glory is revealed they will be there.

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21:1-11

We begin a section of seven whole chapters which deal in great detail with the last week in the earthly life of our Lord. The scene is being set for the Cross and every action is deliberate and with significance. We begin to see a wondrous intermingling of mercy and judgment. We shall read many sobering words but we must not evade them on the ground that God is love. He is not a weak God, nor unrighteous. He has a time for mercy and a time for judgment, and when mercy passes nothing but judgment is left and people are openly challenged as here, where Jesus enacts an Old Testament prophecy before their eyes (Zech.9:9). Refer back to Matt.12:20 and challenge yourself with the last part of the verse. There is judgment! Read Luke 4:18-19. That is quoted from Isaiah 42:1-4, but the last part of that passage about judgment is omitted. Was Jesus making changes in the O.T. Scriptures? Never! When He read that verse His ministry of grace was opening and people were being called to repentance through grace and unto grace and forgiveness and peace. Now, His word and His person rejected, mercy gives place to judgment and it is against such a background that we read the Bible for the next few days.

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21:1-11

The prophet Zechariah had foretold the coming of the King of the Jews in this manner, and described Him as "having salvation", or being in Himself salvation. Now, contrary to His previous method of hiding Himself away from the crowds, Jesus publicly rode into Jerusalem, declaring by action that He was the promised King, and consciously driving people to a crisis of decision concerning Himself. On the face of it He was successful for he was acclaimed with many hosannas, but later chapters reveal how many strands of consideration mingled to bring about His death. The whole people of the Jews was being judged by the presence of their King. We see the fickleness of popular religious affections. They can count for very little. We see the blindness of mind and heart when, in answer to the moving or stirring or disturbing of their hearts, they said, "Who is this?" They did not understand. They said it was a man from Nazareth, and so brought Him down to their level, and gave an excuse for ignoring Him. But this Jesus rode on in lowly majesty, every bit of Him a mighty dignified King. He rode on to die. It was *His* hour. It was *His* Cross and He went to claim it. It was Jesus' day all along, and the fact that people did not see this neither deterred nor hindered Him. On He went, and on He went, and we shall follow step by step. We shall see and hear awesome and awful things and unless we be reprobates we shall know the grip of God upon our hearts.

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21:12-16

The stringent anger and action of Jesus seem to some to be out of character but it is not so. Jesus saw the shame and blasphemy of what was being done in the precincts of the Temple. Men had secularised that which was holy, setting up alongside the altar of God the altar of mammon. In the name of religion (providing animals and coins for use in worship), they had prostituted the buildings that were sanctified unto God, making use of them to satisfy their godless profit-making inclinations. Under the cloak of “religion” they were hiding from men the true purpose and witness of the Temple. But the King came and stood in the midst of His holy Church, and “who may abide the day of His coming for He shall purify the sons of Levi” (Malachi 3:1-4). All that He chastised had been going on for a long time and was generally accepted as a part of the religious set-up of the day. But it was not thereby justified and Jesus cleansed the temple. We need only ponder the Church of our day to imagine the things Jesus would say and do if He visited our holy buildings and looked in vain for prayer meetings and found instead a conglomeration of activity that had no real function except the entertainment of worldly religionists. Let every man and woman who reads this consider the things they do in the buildings of God, for God will not hold them guiltless who close their minds to the instruction of the Word.

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21:12-16

This action of Jesus was one of the great factors that enraged men against Him and caused them to desire His death, so that with God out of the way they might pursue their religion the way they wanted. Their attitude is that a good preacher with eloquence and a bit of fire about him is all very well, but let him keep his hands off our lives. That is not the kind of thing we want! But it is the kind of religion that has power in it to meet the needs of men, and we read here of how the people came and found Jesus in the Temple and He healed them. True ministry will always be opposed and those who support it will be scorned and spoken against. But a Church like that will be a place where sinners find God, a living God who can heal, save, and re-create the broken lives and personalities of many who drift towards the rocks of destruction. My house, said Jesus, shall be a house of prayer, and without the prayers of God's people there will be no power to help young or old. Judgment begins at the House of God (1 Pet.4:17AV).

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21:17-22

Jesus did not tarry to bandy words with those who were displeased and truculent in their complaining. He spoke, acted, left them, went to Bethany and stayed the night no doubt in a home where He was wanted and loved. Next day on the way back to Jerusalem Jesus saw a fig tree, and since such trees put forth their fruit before the leaves, He expected fruit. But closer inspection revealed that in spite of all the semblance of a healthy, flourishing tree, it was in fact barren and useless, and Jesus' words, far from being annoyance, are in fact a parable of judgment on Israel, which is symbolised by the fig-tree. Jesus came to a people much blessed, nurtured beyond their fellows, and which by now should be bearing fruit. Instead there was appearance of health but no fruit, and time for judgment had come. The district of Bethphage was full of fig trees, all still devoid of leaves, and for them the time for examination was not yet. But Jesus expected fruit from this one tree and found none. The lesson scarcely needs pointing. Read Rev. 3:1-3, 14-20. The most favoured plants which have received tender care are the greatest disappointment when they fail to flower.

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21:17-22

The tree looked so good that its withering under the displeasure of the Lord was an astonishment to the disciples and naturally they expressed their astonishment. The explanation was a rebuke from the Son of God. This is very searching when we consider the passing years and the abidingness or otherwise of Gospel works that seem so prosperous and impressive. There is always an explanation for withering. Nothing happens by chance. Then Jesus speaks of prayer, and the connection between the two parts of the passage seems difficult. The emphasis is on faith, the lack of which was the basic reason for the casting off of the nation of Israel, so blessed of God. If you have faith says Jesus, faith that grasps the presence of Almighty God in the outworking of the affairs of

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men, you will not only understand the manifestation of God's judgments, you will see the mountains of difficulties being moved from their places in answer to the request of prayer, and the work of God will move triumphantly onwards. There is authority given in answer to prayer, but when you see that prayer draws you into the fundamental workings of God with its cost and travail of obedience and submission, a new reverence and godly fear dawns on the soul. That is where we begin to worship.

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21:23-27

From this point to the end of chapter 25 we read of the happenings of one day, the Tuesday of the last week of our Lord's earthly life. This gives some idea of the intensity of the situation with its succession of encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders. We shall see groups making up their differences in order to unite against the Son of God. This is an abiding characteristic in a true work of God. The more Jesus laid claim to their hearts, the more they took counsel to slay Him, and the conflict begins here. The rulers came in official deputation to challenge Jesus as to His authority, for they considered themselves *alone* as having jurisdiction over the temple. Their question was unnecessary, for three years of Jesus' ministry had declared unmistakably that His authority was from God. Of course Jesus was ousting them from position, and that was their real complaint. It was not their theology that Jesus challenged but the honesty of their hearts. Jesus does not haggle, nor does He give way in forbearance. The time for that gentle dealing is gone, and these double-dealing men find themselves in a dilemma, and what could be weaker or more pathetic than their answer? "We cannot tell!" But they could tell! It was willingness they lacked. In the same way, men who are asked if they believe the Bible dare not say no, but if they say yes they are open to challenge and rebuke concerning obedience. Come, Pharisees, out into the open. You have met your match.

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21:28-32

They had had enough and would have fain departed but the initiative was with Jesus. He had something to say to them and He made them listen. The contrast is between those professing religion and the tax-gatherers and prostitutes. Jesus says there is more hope for the wayward sinners than for the formal and empty religious. He says again that evil in a wicked and base man may not be nearly so deep as the evil in the heart of a religious hypocrite. Jesus is almost ruthless as he drives these men to condemn themselves. He told them, "You heard John's (the Baptist) word, saw the -results and evidences of authenticity; your intellect and conscience testified that this was of God but you would not receive it. Your religion is a sham, and you will see many surprising people enter the kingdom while you are excluded." What more needs to be said!

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21:33- 46

Yesterday's parable spoke of obedience as the test, and now faithfulness in service is the issue. On the one hand we see the kindness, thoroughness, provision and care of the house-holder who entrusted his work to men privileged to be his servants. On the other hand we see the base ingratitude, hard pride and cruel indifference of the tenants, who betrayed their sacred trust because of their grasping self-seeking. Then from their own lips Jesus drew the sentence of rightful, justified and necessary judgment. What were these servants doing? They were using the sphere of God's Kingdom, its provision, its buildings, its offerings, its people to serve and further their own ends. They had made God and His house their servants, and when God's messengers came seeking fruit, they cast them out. Then when conviction pricked their consciences they sought to slay the final messenger, God's own Son. We do well to examine our own Sundays, to say nothing of the rest of the week. Our formal attendance at worship may be nothing but a concession to public opinion, a habit, or an offering to the idol of respectability and self-righteousness. It may be merely an act to qualify us in decency for service in another sphere. On the other hand it might be a desire to hear the word of God and do it. You judge!

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21:33-46

We stay with this parable because of the presumption of our hearts and our glib assurance that *we* are the people of God and can rest sure of His blessing. None bears so patiently with human frailty as God, but there comes a time that trifling with the privilege of holy service cannot be allowed to continue. We can apply this to the whole nation, to denominations, congregations, families and individuals. Consider v.43 very seriously, recalling the tragic story and issue of Saul, King of Israel, whose life we have been considering on Sunday evenings (1 Sam.15:24-30, 35). God means business in this world and there is no place for triflers. His holy purposes will not be thwarted. He will find a people to do His will. You say it is too hard? Only to the impenitent. There is a brokenness that is the beginning of healing and life. But there is a crushing that is desolatingly final.

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22:1-14

The two previous parables applied to the hearts of the Pharisees brought only a deeper intensity of hatred. But the popular interest of the crowd in Jesus kept the Pharisees back because, come what may, they had to keep in with the people. Jesus spoke again a parable concerning neither duty nor labour but rather the willing grace of the King to welcome hungry men to the feast of love and joy. But the blackness of the hearts of those invited was made manifest in that they made light of the grace that called them. They made it a joke and treated both invitation and messenger spitefully, just as people jeer (behind his back usually) at a minister and laugh and joke about "seeing the light". For some the sweetness of the Gospel invitation means nothing and by others it is resented. But the wedding was furnished with guests, all of whom had a hunger of heart for forgiveness, assurance and hope of heaven. Some had a history of moral badness with no religious background, and some with a history of respectability and godly training. They sat down at the King's great feast, whilst the others fell under judgment for they had proved themselves unworthy.

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22:1-14

In the context of this parable consider Jesus' word in v.7. He spoke of the armies of the King and the destruction of a city. This actually came to pass in the year A.D.70 when Jerusalem was over-run and burned by the armed might of a pagan power. The judgment on wilful rejection of the Son of God is in part earthly in its fulfilment and the instruments of judgment, though they may be secular military powers, are spoken of as God's armies. Now apply this to our present day and age and consider the possible political and military developments that could come to pass so very quickly. Now consider the worldliness of the Churches of all denominations; the superficiality of even fundamentalistic organisations; the entertainment content of many gatherings; the religious words and music that cloak hearts not obedient to God; a nation and a community contemptuous of God's word and holy laws. What do you think God ought to do? He might well do so, and that much sooner than any of us dare to think. In such an hour as ye think not.....!

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22:1-14

There is a tremendous amount of teaching in these passages and we find our last lesson in v.8-14 where the King comes to see His guests. There is something awe-inspiring about this King who brooks no human interference with His plans. The King, by whose call they were there, walked among the guests and He saw a man improperly dressed, challenged him, and in the silence of his speechless guilt ordered the man to be cast out. Was this harsh and unreasonable? No! At such a feast the King would have *provided* at the door a robe or garment to be worn by each person. This speaks of the robe of righteousness given in Christ to cover the rags of our sin and self-righteousness which are an offence to God. The receiving and wearing of it signifies the recipient's submission to-the King. But this man dared to take his place among the guests to share the privileges and pleasures of a guest while still refusing the appointed way of acceptance. His action and attitude showed the grossest arrogance and flaunted his pride in the face of the King. He had every intention of brazening it out when the time came. But then, when a Christ-rejecting sinner is finally faced by God, he will be speechless.

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Never forget, it is not the accepting of the gracious invitation that counts, but a changed heart and life! That is where many professed conversions fall to the ground.

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22:15-22

Jesus' preaching was so real and radical, with no loopholes for cunning people to escape, that He inevitably roused hatred in professional religionists to whom religion was a pleasing game or hobby. We are not surprised that we find Pharisee, Herodian, and Sadducee getting together to scheme for Jesus' downfall (Mk.12:13; Acts 4:1). Have you ever considered how Jesus was subject to slander and persecution all through His ministry? Never be surprised at what people will do. Some of those nearest you will turn and rend you if your words touch their conscience concerning some pet idol! Their flattery here is obnoxious and Jesus knew to disregard it. Their question was subtle. If Jesus answered "No" they could denounce Him to the Romans; if "Yes", they could denounce Him to the Jews as a traitor. But Jesus' answer was big. He told them they were part of a social and economic order, partaking of its benefits, and therefore they should fulfil their obligations. Serve in the army, pay your taxes, keep the laws. These are Caesar's things. But if in conscience you feel that to submit in some particular issue would be to deny your God, then obey God rather than man. But be quite sure your conscience is informed by God and not by the stubborn prejudice of your own unteachable mind and heart. We like people to have convictions and to stand by them, but it is a great sign of grace, if later you see you were wrong, to confess it publicly in the same quarter as you formerly objected. There are some people, not all young, who are far too cock-sure that they know exactly what God thinks about certain things. Time will tell!

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22:23-33

Since these Sadducees did not in fact believe in the resurrection at all, their question was fraudulent, just like so many of the difficulties people produce about the Bible. If you don't want to do a thing you can produce all manner of difficulties that will be a sop to the conscience. Jesus told these men they were wrong in every respect. Their thoughts, their Bible knowledge and their idea of God were all on a basis of material existence in this world which, at its best, is temporary. This life is but the shadow of the reality that is yet to be. There is, and always will be, a measure of mystery because as the Bible says, eye has not seen, nor has man's imagination ever dreamed or grasped what God has prepared for than that love Him (1 Cor.2:9 AV). This much is certain. For all those who belong to God because they are "in Christ" the world to come will not be less than this world, but greater. What we know in a fallen world of human joys and relationships is as nothing compared to what they will be in the life to come when they are freed from the limitations of the physical. Instead of being destroyed, redeemed humanity in all its wonderful aspects and capacities will find its consummation and perfection. After all, assuming we are Christians, when we die we shall not be dead. God is not the God of the dead but the living. People ask all sorts of questions as to whether we shall recognise our loved ones in heaven. But surely we shall not be more stupid than now. Heaven is life, and it is abundant. Even the seed thought is wonderful, and we marvel as did the multitude.

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22:34-40

With calm unhurried assurance, Jesus turned the tables on both the Herodians and Sadducees and put them to silence or muzzled them, as the word literally should read (34). Now, their schemes having failed, the Pharisees had to come out into the open. They were snared in their own net and were about to ask a question that would floor, not Jesus, but themselves. They had a whole rigmarole of laws and observances and they simply loved playing make-believe games of religion. They dressed up and strutted about; formed committees and issued statements; they processed and palavered and felt so important in the community. But God was not in it; neither was man; for their religion had no heart and no love, and these things, said Jesus, were the sum of all the law. This love is not mere sentiment or emotion. Human feelings can become terribly corrupt in themselves. Parents can see no wrong in their children and defend them even when their guilt is manifest. But love that first finds its root and expression in God is a love that flows to others in a care and compassion which, far from binding heavy burdens on them in the name of religion, leads them to the fountain of love and life, wherein they find

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their true selves and are healed and helped and saved. The ones who asked the question thought themselves experts on Old Testament law but had their eyes opened that day to the depth of humanity that is found in true divinity. Jesus' religion was very different from theirs.

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22:41-46

One of the most staggering things to meet in life is the absolute blindness of mind of people with a religious and biblical background. There are people who, having been taught as children, become Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, office bearers and even ministers, yet have not the slightest grasp or understanding as to the person and work of Jesus Christ the Saviour. There is no more revealing question than that of v.42. But surely the Pharisees should have understood. Their own Old Testament Scriptures were full of promises of a coming Messiah. They looked for a Messiah, a man like themselves, clothed in human flesh, but they could not grasp how such an One could also be their God. Their minds were darkened and Jesus' question about the words of Psalm 110 left them silenced and afraid. Perhaps their fear betokens more guilt in their consciences than we realise. Their King and their God was before their eyes with countless testimonials of words and works, but they could not see the truth. Or was it that they *would* not see? We were reminded by our Session Clerk as he reviewed one year's events at an Annual Business Meeting that this was still happening. He quoted from Isaiah 53:1, summing up months of ministry vindicated by spiritual and material fruit, saying, "Lord who has believed our report". It is truly frightening and a cause of marvelling worship that God has lightened our darkness. But for the grace of God....!!!

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23:1-12

This chapter is like a torrent of searing flame from the lips of the lowly and loving Jesus and causes us to cringe, and the reason for such a reaction is that there is far more than a taint of Pharisaism in every single one of us. In this first section v.2-7 seem to be addressed to the multitude to expose the falseness of the accepted teachers. Then v.8-12 address the disciples to warn them of the dangers of discipleship. The truth is that the more we see the falsity of some teachers of religion and their God-dishonouring precepts, the more we are in danger of becoming exalted in our own minds and hearts, feeling superior. Beware! Read v.12 and go down on your knees, before the holy hand of your Lord and Master has to deal with you. No single class of person escapes this sifting process. On your knees read v.5-7, and review your life as a professing Christian. How full of yourself are you? How much does people's praise determine your actions? Are you the kind who manages to keep in with all the "best folk"? Why do you do it? Is it place you are after? Are you a rebel just for the sake of being different? Read the passage, again and again.

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23:1-12

We can safely study the passage now since we have been first examined by it. There is first of all a terrible denunciation of certain ministers and teachers. They have sat themselves in Moses' seat, therefore honour and don't despise their office. As they teach faithfully expounding God's law, receive it and obey, but don't imitate their lives. They are good speakers and bad livers. Jesus rebukes their inconsistency. Then He exposes their vanity. Their entrances were impressive, so sure that all eyes were upon them as they moved with haughty manner, giving a sidelong glance to estimate the size of the congregation. Their devotion was intense and obvious. Why, long after the congregation had begun to leave they were still in their seats with heads bowed estimating how much longer they should remain in that position so that people would recognize their spirituality. Their prayers were longer than others and well laced with ample quotation of Scripture, especially some obscure verses they had found by chance in the concordance. Inconsistency, vanity and ambition: that was the sum of their religion.

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23:1-12

Jesus warns lest His own disciples fall prey to this self-absorbed lust. Be not called Rabbi or Master. That is do not take authority over others, remembering that you are only a servant and your brother or sister will no doubt have some gift you lack. Call no man 'father' as if he had some authority over your soul and was able to minister or sell grace to you. One is your Father, even God above, from whom alone you receive all you possess and to whom you are accountable. This still leaves rightful place for honour to our fathers in the faith by whose instrumentality we were converted and established. That is a debt we must never forget. Honour your father and mother. Be not called Master in the sense of drawing the allegiance of people to yourself. They are not yours. You did not die for them (save in costly travail until Christ was formed in them, and long after in bearing with their childish cheek and rebellion). Would you be great? Then be like Jesus, servant of all. And He washed even Judas' feet. Lord make us like this. "Content to fill a little space, if Thou be glorified" (hymn by A.L. Waring).

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23:13

As we consider this chapter section by section, remember that the whole of it was delivered at one time and forms only a part of one day's preaching stretching from chapter 21:18 to the end of chapter 25. All the words of chapter 23 were delivered with no blunting of their edge, but while there was a piercing, devastating power in them there was no venom, as evidenced by the end of the chapter. They are real, and reality is always a shock. These men, professing religion and exercising authority therein, are accused of being barriers and hindrances to other people finding God and life and salvation. In the face of all Jesus' words they would not submit themselves and enter the realm of His kingship and obedience. Therefore, by example and influence of life and word they closed the door against others, and of course they will be held accountable to God for such crime. There are many ways of brainwashing and removing from people's minds the seed of the word preached. We do it with our children, with our blatant worldliness for six days of the week, and with our contemptuous criticism of the preacher, let alone his message. Woe unto you.....! Jesus said it.

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23:14¹

If the previous verse speaks of opposition to Jesus this one speaks of insincerity. We quote from the Bible Readings of Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen: "There is a ratio between long public prayers and insincerity. There is long prayer that is lost in wonder love and praise. There is also long prayer in public that tries to make up for lack of faith by many words. And there is long prayer in public which tries to atone for private sins. The person whose private life is right with God can happily make his prayers short, if need be. Put it another way: if it is a close friend who is ringing your door bell, you can run out from the job you are doing in your shirt sleeves and cry, "Come in". If it is a stranger, that won't do! If we are "devouring widow's houses" or anything else that is wrong, God will be pretty strange to us, and our prayers will take on a formal note. This, by the way, is different from a reverent note. There cannot be too much of that. It should grow deeper every day. Familiarity never breeds contempt with God, but deeper awe and reverent fear, but withal – simplicity."

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23:15

This is the third woe spoken by Jesus against the Pharisees. Each time He calls them hypocrites, that is, play actors in religion, and each time He adds a reason for so calling them. Here it is their zeal and tireless activity that is challenged, for their desire is not for the temporal and eternal betterment of their proselytes, but in order to add yet another to their party or side and thus try to guarantee enough numerical strength so that they might continue to have their will done in ecclesiastical matters. No consideration is given by them to what God has revealed as His will for His people. No desire to be instructed and led by God exists in their religious attitudes, desires and activities. They will have *their* way no matter the means, and they go about vote-catching to guarantee the result. This is nothing but a desire to unseat God and take His place, and marks out such men and

¹ See footnote in NIV

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women as children of hell beguiling unwary souls to their everlasting condemnation. Two thoughts emerge from this. First, how constantly we must bring our activities and motives to God for scrutiny. Second, in face of such a deeply evil situation, our confidence must be in God alone to keep us from evil and to deal with its malignant ramifications around us. Think on these things, and the God of peace be with you.

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23:16-22

Blind guides! What a vivid picture of so many people in places of authority both sacred and secular. We see people groping in all directions for some sure word of guidance in this evil world, and we see young and old following every new-fangled notion or policy or pleasure that is invented but only finding a deeper frustration and darkness. Blind guides, who in every subject from juvenile delinquency to corporal punishment have shut their eyes to God's Word, can lead only to the ditch. But what of the passage? We have the guardians of the nation's morals playing a game of special pleading. They made distinctions between vows made by or on the altar and temple, and those made by or on the gifts laid there. A man may be loosed from the first kind of vow but not the second. But why? Simply because the gifts and the gold were removable whilst the building was not. If the priests freed a man from the vow made with the gift he had given, then he had to get his money back. There was no profit of filthy lucre then for the priest. It was a religion of profitable considerations. Some say that all men have their price, and with some it is a small, small price indeed. This kind of religion has lost its bearings completely.

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23:23-24

Three lessons in two verses. The scriptural principle to determine what a man should give to the House of the Lord is stated in Leviticus 27:30 - one tenth of the income, and this principle is confirmed here by Jesus. That such faithfulness in giving brings blessing to the giver is a secondary consideration. We do not speak often of this matter because it is done in secret unto the Lord. But *giving* on the required Biblical and Christian level does not excuse from the obligation to *live* on a level that is pleasing to God. We cannot contract out of the parts of Christian life that do not appeal to us. That is Jesus' second point. The third lesson concerns those who get all excited and disturbed about small, unessential matters concerning the house of God and who yet ignore the Son of God. Some would be far more upset if there were no vases of flowers in Church than if there were no sermons. A whole service can be spoiled for some by not getting into a particular seat, while the preaching on the death of Jesus leaves them quite unmoved. A few pounds spent on visitor's hymn books is a mountainous problem whilst a Kirk full of people to hear, perchance to be saved, means nothing. Gnats and camels; motes and beams; things have hardly changed!

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23:25-26

Isn't Jesus relentless? He goes on and on hammering away at the same nail-head and every blow is right on the spot. This kind of preaching does not lend itself to eloquence, novelty or acceptability but it certainly cracks open the crust of deadened consciences. Not many vacancy committees would have had second thoughts about a candidate who preached like this. But this kind of preaching reaches the right place because it aims at the heart. The aim of preaching the Word of God is not to produce some superficial, surface reformation in a person's life but to re-create the heart. This is fundamental. If a man is a sinner by nature, as all men in fact are, then he may polish, renovate, adorn, the outward life as much as he likes, making it exceedingly attractive and even praiseworthy by others (if they don't know him too well) but he is still a sinner and nothing but a sinner, well-bred, well-mannered, well-clad, but still a sinner. What can we do, you ask. Nothing at all. You must be born again. You have to be made a new creature by and in Christ Jesus. Note, you have to *be made*, not make yourself. That is why you need Jesus. He is the only one who can do it. He is the only one who can reconcile a sinner to God. Do you see? A new heart is a gift, and the outworking of it a new life that is pleasing to God.

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23:27-28

This seems the same lesson but it goes further. Appearances can be very deceptive, because when we see some people stopping certain things in their life and starting other things we conclude that they have been converted and we accept them as Christians. This can be very unwise and indeed dangerous because, when they see themselves so easily accepted into the fellowship of the church they are tempted to evade that more radical inward renewing and renovation whereby the deeper evils and digressions of personality and life are remedied. Jesus' illustration has a revolting aroma about it, but it is necessary for it speaks of decay that is never static but progressive and contaminating. This same danger is met when newly converted people get themselves launched into a spate of 'holy' activity. Meetings take the place of cinemas, and you meet with your friends for coffee afterwards. Sentimental hymns take the place of the latest 'pops', and of course, there are the 'idols' (preachers) who can do no wrong and every meeting is just wonderful and you enjoyed it so much! Dead men's bones. There is no spiritual nourishment there, but of course it does not matter because there is no life to feed. It was no conversion but a surface change of activities. People may be taken in, but God looks on the heart. People also see in the end because there is no spiritual growth to adult categories of understanding and activity. You have a name that you live and are dead. (Rev. 3:1)

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23:29-33

Now the sword of the Word challenges the traditions we hold dear and by which we order life and religion. But our traditions are like our fancies, we hold them or desert them according to choice and convenience. The truth is we are so conditioned to 'double-think' and the policy of expediency in most of our life that we apply the rule to our dealings with God. We are sanctimonious frauds, piously boasting that if *we* had been living in earlier days we would not have done the evil they did in opposing the prophets of God. Yes you would, says Jesus, and the proof is that you are following the example of your fathers now. They did always resist the Holy Ghost no matter with what voice He spoke, and you in like manner are going on to finish the work they began. Do you see how Jesus has got beneath the surface of all their specious talk and spurious religion? They were in fact anti-God, anti-Christ, anti-Bible, anti-prayer meeting, anti-holiness, anti-obedience: they were anti every word that called them to give God His place and worship Him instead of idolising their self-righteous wills. There is only one inevitable and necessary end to this kind of thing and it is stated with all the passion of the Son of God in v.33. To accept this passage and others like it would bring to the Church and its preaching a power of good.

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23:34-36

We continue the realism of yesterday's reading and face the fact that there are men and women within the lists of Church members who would go to Hell rather than yield their wills to God. That is the depth and strength of their godlessness. If these plain words of Jesus are not enough turn to Revelation 6:16-17; 16:10-11. Note that even in their anguish they did not repent. There was no regret, and the fury of hatred and refusal and contempt of Christ, so long concealed by polite, worldly Churchianity, is now revealed for what it was. It was there all the time. Do not be deceived. You can always tell by watching what they do to the prophets and their preaching. You can also be sure that the judgment of God will come upon them, for God will not hold them guiltless. Now if these verses speak of an accumulation of judgment that fell upon Jerusalem when it was destroyed in A.D. 70, with all the horrors and suffering that secular historians record, how much more must we now live in the shadow of a mightier judgment to come at the end of this age. The heaping up of masses of iniquity, both respectable and base, are known unto God, and His judgment must come. It will come first in human misery yet to be unleashed by men upon the earth and then finally in the eternal fires of everlasting punishment. It is a fearful thing, whichever way you look at it, to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb.10:26-31).

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23:37-39

The relief with which we turn to these verses must not be allowed to dilute the fierce radicalness of the rest of the chapter. Indeed, they bring us to the final tragedy of unbelief that we have read about, namely that the

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awfulness of judgment need never be the lot of any man but for his own insistence that it should be so. *I would*, says Jesus, *but you would not*. Our Lord had no morbid pleasure in preaching judgment, nor was His heart free from pain in so doing. But because He loves He speaks the startling words that jar and jolt people, so that, being faced with the stark realities of sin and judgment, they may be moved to repentance. Never forget that a passage like this speaks of the failure of Jesus' love, and we must discern the sob of His holy heart as He sees the inevitable issue. The rejectors are themselves rejected and the gloom of desolation falls like a dark winter's night and the winds of severity and cruel storm are beginning to rise. Perhaps the people most in danger of this dread end are the least concerned. Perhaps they sit lightly to all that is said about it. But remember, we know not what a day may bring.

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24:1-3

The last chapter did not end Jesus' solemn words, indeed it was but a very necessary introduction to what follows. The disciples ask 'When?', and the answer stretches over the next two chapters. It would be all too easy to get lost in detail and bogged down with conflicting interpretations of these matters and we will not try to be dogmatic. The strands are intertwined and some references are to things that happened in Jerusalem in A.D.70, and yet point to a greater fulfilment later in history now past, and again to something yet to come. It is like looking at a range of mountains and seeing the peaks but not the valleys in between. What Jesus says will shake our complacent thinking about a world already convulsed by two world wars and, having learned nothing from them, has become more and more sceptical about holy truth and more and more complacent and unthinking about material permanence. Even signs in the heavens have become commonplace. Jesus' disciples were frankly cynical and showed off to Jesus their big solid temple, seemingly set for generations. But Jesus shook them in v.2, as many a congregation has been and shall be shaken by the disappearance of their own buildings. This prompted the anxious question that appears to be threefold: (1) concerning these things, (2) your coming, and (3) the end of the age. Now we follow Jesus' words given in answer.

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24:4-8

Jesus begins with a warning not to be led astray by those who are too sure about exactly what is going to be and when. There is an element of mystery that still remains. The disciples thought of the success of Christ in terms of an earthly establishment wherein they themselves would hold high position. *We* are not free from this error and much of our talk and prayer about revival arises from spirits that are tired of being the underdog and want to be on the successful side. Jesus says things are to get worse and worse in the world and in the Church, and this is only the beginning of sorrows (AV) or birth-pains. Note that Jesus warns of the danger of being deceived and led away from the truth because that would result in our thinking being distorted and anchored in the present circumstances. But greater in significance than the physical sufferings that will be the lot of those upon earth as the history of the world gathers itself towards the cataclysm of final destructive judgment is the hope signified in the phrase "the birth-pains". There is no hope held out of *this* world improving, and certainly not of a world converted. The victory of Christ and of God, while it is most certainly a triumphal victory, is inseparably linked with earthly things in this confusing age we live in. The powers that be are not working behind God's back, but for Him (whether they know it or not), to do His will, and therefore we must rightly face the possibility of another world war, the subjugation of our own islands under atheistic communism and the paralysing of the humanity of life by the devouring monster of scientific advance. It takes real faith to face this beginning of sorrows, but real faith will stand even when it comes.

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24:9-13

All who bear the name of Jesus and refuse to compromise their loyalty to Him in order to keep in with prevailing fashion will always find themselves persecuted. To hold to the view that sincerity of faith will be respected by everyone has no place in the Scriptures. The speaking of the word of the Lord stands over against all that people affirm in their unbelief to rebuke and to challenge. Just try speaking plainly to someone about God and His Son and His Word; press the truth home to the conscience and you will soon see the resentment.

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Now carry on doing it and you will soon experience hatred and possibly violence even from the 'nicest' of them. The Church is not persecuted in this country today because worldly people consider her not worth bothering about. But let her once thunder the Bible at the community, regarding Sunday observance or sexual morality for example, and you will see the sparks, and the Church will be told to keep to her own affairs. As the days go on toward the consummation of the world's history there will be many turncoats, many beguiled away to fancy doctrines and spooky meetings, and many will just lose interest. But he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved.

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24:14-22

These words we read are so staggering and terrible that we feel they must refer to the days of the end of the world at the second coming of Christ. It is not difficult for us now to imagine such horrors unleashed on the earth, for we have proved how bestial and demonic and utterly inhuman man can be. Through today's verses there is a throb of apprehension, fear and urgency and we should begin to find all our complacency and superficiality being swept away. We dare not try to disentangle the exact meaning of today's reading. In relation to v.14 the present surge of activity of missionary societies to reach hitherto untouched tribes and the use of literature and radio seems to bring the end very near, and who knows? But at the heart of all this awful carnage there is order and plan and control; for the God of salvation has his eye and heart set upon His own and for that reason, though partakers of the common judgment of the human' race, yet not one hair of their head shall perish. Does not this cause us to draw nearer to God? Much nearer than in fact we may have been living. To be disturbed by these readings is far better than to be taken quite unawares by the event.

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24:23-28

It becomes increasingly obvious in the light of what we read that it is not the blazing and meteoric enthusiast that is the real Christian, but the one possessed of a deep hidden fire of trust and conviction. This kind of stability, not to say sensibility, is an asset, for it guards the soul against the specious words of the many false prophets that are part and parcel of the end of the age. The extravagance of some of the claims made, and the multitudes that swallow such nonsensical drivel as the story of the Book of Mormon and the magic spectacles by which its ancient script was deciphered (both book and spectacles were conveniently taken back by the angel who gave them) speak of either mental unbalance or demonic delusion. We are told here to be on guard and not to be taken in, for although such false prophets manifest strange and mighty deeds as well as words, they are not of God. Their task is to disorganise and demoralise the very elect of God so as to add confusion to the climax of events, as if the Devil, knowing he could not prevent the final victory of God, was trying to conceal its glory. This cannot and will not be, as verse 27 begins to indicate and as tomorrow's passage makes plain. Jesus says, 'I have told you before it comes' (25). It is our duty to be on guard.

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24:29-35

All is here spoken of as sudden and glorious and altogether free from doubt. It is as if a mighty shudder convulsed the earth and the heavens, and as the clouds of the sky part the Son of Man, the King of glory, appears in all due pomp and splendour. No dirty stable this time, nor an ignoring world, but with the triumphant sounds of music, and with the blaze of glory that is too much for men to look upon, the King comes and His throne of judgment is set. The whole world will stop and look and listen, for it could not do otherwise. Some will be paralysed with terror when they recognise the King as the Jesus they had relegated to the junk heap of their cluttered lives. Some will be filled with regrets that they took such little notice of the preaching they heard and ignored. Some will look to their worldly companions for a joke to cheer them but the "comedians" of the world who have laughed untold millions into hell will be grey with apprehension. Some, though filled with awe and wonder and possessed of a deep desire to bow themselves low at His feet, will recognise Him and in answer to the pulse of eternal joy in their hearts will mingle their voices in the greatest Hallelujah Chorus that has ever been heard. Even so, come Lord Jesus!

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24:36-44

We dare not go along with those who speculate as to dates, for they trespass into God's secret territory (36). Suffice it that a date is fixed! In v.34 of yesterday's reading 'generation' may well mean 'race', that is the Jews. Jesus warns us to read the signs of the times, but in today's verses it seems many will be quite blind and unconcerned. The description of life is not that of debauchery but of the common tasks of life, and therein is the awful danger. We live pre-occupied lives. There is so much to be done that we have no time for pondering eternal things and instead of watching and being ready we casually leave it all alone in the fond assumption that somehow God will look after that side of things and see that we who politely ignore Him will have a place prepared for us. There will be, but it may well not be in heaven. The things God has prepared are for them that love Him. One is taken to blessedness and the other left to the harvest of godlessness. You can be very polite and nice and still be without God. Watch! Be ye also ready! Not with emotional tension that is always precipitating a crisis, but with a life suffused with assurance of the fact that Jesus will come. Such a person will have a far more balanced and reasoned attitude to present world events. They will survey the world around them and make far more valid judgments and decisions. They will reach more often for the abiding word of Holy Scripture that makes them wise to salvation, and looking perhaps on their children fast asleep, will draw near to God in prayer and trust. Be ye also ready, for ye know not what hour....

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24:45-51

This chapter has spoken of certain facts: The Second Coming of Christ - let no man deceive you (4); World History gathering to its appointed consummation; the Harvest of Evil on earth increasing in intensity as the end draws near; and the unpreparedness of many. The exhortation has been to watch and to be ready. Now comes the first of three parables to illustrate judgment. Some say they apply to Christian and non-Christian, others say they refer to faithful and unfaithful Christians. We can use both views, although v.51, and chap.25:12 and 30 are difficult to understand in relation to a Christian who cannot be eternally disowned by Christ. Our passage tells us that whether we like it or not (since all are servants, even the devil) we are entrusted with the work of Christ while He is absent. We are the keepers of the work and of our brother, being required to feed him when he is in need. But when we transgress and desire to be rulers instead of servants, and make the household of the Master to serve our own greedy and indulgent ends we lay ourselves open to the rebuke and punishment from the Lord when He comes. We do well to apply this to our relationship to the work of God in the household or congregation to which we belong, and not least in our attitude to the ministers we are pledged to support and serve. There is a reward for faithfulness and for unfaithfulness. See ye to it!

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25:1-13

Again there are many varied interpretations. The virgins all had oil, which speaks of the Holy Spirit, but with some the oil went done! Were they Christians at all, or were they foolish and neglectful Christians as many are? Jesus seems to say they did not look like His people at all and certainly they were shut out from something very desirable. Note that the bridegroom delayed; He was not hindered. He knew what He was doing and He certainly brought out the differences in the virgins. At first they all seemed the same and on the same level. There is no record of sin or deep apostacy, they just seemed to dwindle and fade out, and when crisis came the sudden spurt of earnestness was futile. Is this a warning against the danger of neglecting our God-given salvation-life? Note that they all slept (and that can be the right thing to do when you are tired). But some were still vitally equipped and were ready when the time came. But for the others there was no borrowed or second-hand provision. The details of the parable are difficult but the picture is all too clear and disturbing. That is what it is meant to be!

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25:14-30

This is the parable of service, and working is the only true means of waiting and watching. Our Lord is no patron of idleness. The tasks given and the endowment necessary were not all equal. Each was given according

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to ability, and God asks no more and no less than He has bestowed. Our part is to recognise both our abilities *and* our limitations. A great deal of unnecessary friction, jealousy and misery in life is generated simply because we are not willing to be what God made us for. God has His special men as Jesus had His inner circle of three and His favourite John. We have no right to be jealous if Jesus gets more pleasure from one than another. We are the same in human friendships. But it was the man from whom least was asked that complained the most. The others were faithful, and because they had worked they were rewarded. The last man, bitter and full of self-pity because he was not among the 'big' people, did not work and as a result lost his privilege and it was given to another. He did not abuse his talent or turn it to selfish ends. He simply neglected it, as he would have done if he had been given ten talents. His life was exposed as unproductive because of sloth; his talent was recalled; and his person rejected. Who is that faithful servant? Lord, is it I?

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25:14-30

The whole passage from chapter 24:45 illustrates the judgment of God in a very personal way. Each parable centres on a man's faithfulness. It is not so much what he is given that matters as what he does with what he is given in talent and opportunity. Jesus first speaks of faithfulness within the household of faith (cf. Gal. 6:10), our human dealings with our fellow believers. Then He speaks of faithfulness in personal and private devotion to the absent Lord. Therein lies the secret of many a dry Christian life. But the secret backsliders and sleepers were found out, and left out, when others enjoyed the marriage feast. The last parable concerns work and not pleasure. Those who refuse to carry their share of the work find themselves chastised and laid aside from any further service. Note that the one talent man took the way of least resistance and effort; buried the talent and went off to enjoy his pet hobbies; then after a long time when he was found out and his crass laziness could no longer be hidden, he blamed the Lord for being too hard. We begin to see the explanation of how no person *gradually* comes to the forefront in the fellowship and another *gradually* fades out. Take heed. What you lose here you cannot recoup in heaven.

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25:31-46

Study this long passage carefully and see how much detail is given before the fact of eternal separation in everlasting heaven or hell. These are grim and solemn words and if you look on to the next chapter you will see that this was the last sermon of Jesus to His own people, leaving them with no doubt that the background to their life and service is hell as well as heaven. How glibly people say at a funeral, "They are better away." If they die in the faith of Jesus Christ (and we see tomorrow what that means) they are most assuredly better. But....!!! It is appointed to men to die and after this the judgment (Heb.9:27(AV)). This judgment is final, irrevocable and eternal. It proceeds from the throne of God and its executors are the angels of God. Verse 31 tells of a righteous judge; v.32 a shepherd who knows his own and the intruders who are not of his fold; v.34 a King who personally supervises and justifies the verdicts he passes. There is no warrant here for believing that if you are good and kind and decent to your fellows it does not matter what you believe about Jesus. All hangs on your relationship with Him, Jesus and me, and how we get on together, how we have treated each other. The judgment of God ratifies the judgment we pass on ourselves by the place we give to Jesus.

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25:31-46

If you know any real Christians be very careful how you treat them for Jesus judges your attitude to *Him* by your dealings with *them*. The test is not profession of faith but practice of grace and if our profession of conversion and salvation does not make us gracious and kind and considerate on practical human levels, then we are not saved and on the day of God's judgment we shall be terrifyingly surprised. Note the down-to-earth terms that are used: "hungry" because hard up; "naked" because clothes having been worn too long have dropped off. Think of how out-of-date and faded the clothes of *some* of our missionaries on furlough look. They feel it!!! Jesus singles out loneliness that was not alleviated, and sickness not cared for, and the servants of God in prison and disgrace and not fortified by the loyalty and care of others. In as much!!! (v.40, 45AV). Note also how unselfconscious was the gracious witness of the righteous. To them it seemed so small and so obvious a thing to do and they

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found a way to do it without embarrassing the recipient. They marvel at the undeserved grace and welcome given to them while the unrighteous were bitter and indignant at their rejection. By their fruits you shall know them.

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25:46

Whether you are in Church today or not will you give thought to ministers and congregations in the light of this verse, for it is such a verse as this that determines the nature, content, and urgency of our ministry and prayers (cf. 2 Cor. 2:15-17; 5:10-11). We must find ourselves with the Book of God in our heart and hand and mouth warning people to flee from the wrath that is to come. This we must do by telling them all we can about God from His Word. It is the full counsel of God that saves and that therefore must be preached and not a man-narrowed version of a 'simple' Gospel. There is nothing simple about it. The mighty God becomes man in His Son, and that Son suffers the pains of sin, death and the grave, descending into Hell so that wretched creatures such as we should be saved unto life and everlasting glory. Is that simple? It is staggering. It is the down-coming humiliation of God for love of His rebellious, disreputable children. All the while in the mystery of His eternal purpose He knows that many will never be softened and won by love and grace and such are reserved unto righteous judgment. God's ways and works are righteous and we do not seek to explain them. None will be found at last in the wrong place. God is not ashamed of Hell, nor must we be. Believe it. Preach it and pray in the light of that fact. Consider Scottish Paraphrase 15 (of the words of Eccles.9:4-6, 10) and draw near to God in worship.

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26:1-5

We pass now from the record of the words and works of Jesus to the story of His sufferings and death. We trace our Lord through the slow agony of what we call Holy Week, or as v.2 indicates, through three days of it. If we can read these chapters easily then there can be no grace in us at all. It is holy ground as we draw near to the heart and centre of the eternal purposes of God's plan of redemption, indeed, to the bleeding heart of God Himself. GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD. Who shall ever know the cost to the Father's heart? Who shall ever know, save as we glimpse it in the sacred record, the cost in human terms to the human Son of God? We need all the Hymns in CH2 from number 94-113. They will help our worship. Take numbers 94 (Weep not for Him) and 102 (O perfect life of love) for today's reading. What we see is the quiet resolute purpose of God and the restless scheming of evil men. Man said "not on the feast day", but Jesus said "on the feast day", and so it was. Consider John 7:30, 32, 45-46 and similar references. There was a restraint upon both men and the devil behind them until the appointed time was come. This is strong comfort. We who belong to Jesus are never victims of circumstances. Our Lord is in fact Lord of all that happens. It may be a way of tears as it was for our blessedly human and sensitive Jesus, but it is God's way in its progress and completion.

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26:1-5

Let the Scriptures slow down our tendency to rush so that in viewing the calm and assured composure of God we might learn that in quietness and confidence is our strength (Isa.30:15). *Then* (3), when Jesus had finished all His ministry and not one moment before then, things developed. Who would have guessed that *His* hour had come; the hour for which He was born? There is no commotion. It is all so quiet. But this does not minimise the human awareness of the crisis and its exhausting demand. Our Lord was aware of the virulent, devil-inspired hatred of men and also, as we shall see, He was painfully aware of the blind incomprehension of His own disciples. We shall see the cruel torture of it tomorrow, and again in the lonely cry of Gethsemane, in the hour of Peter's denial, in Judas' kiss and in the loving eye that looked on and cared for His mother in the hour of death. What a man! Yes it was as a man He did all this. "O break, O break hard heart of mine" (Faber). It was all for me and for you and yet we seem to count it a small thing. Behold the Man, and love Him.

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26:6-13

Only one thing marred the blessed sweetness of this sanctuary in Bethany. No. It was not the presence of Judas, but the inhumanity of the disciples who considered the kind act of the woman to be a waste. Why were they always so unwilling to give Jesus a little bit of extra human care and consideration? Were they afraid they would not get full value for their money? Is there not justification for laying aside our thoughts of what is 'enough' and giving to the man who does God's work that which is 'extra'? Out of all the associates present in that house, all of whom owed a tremendous debt of gratitude to Jesus, only one woman, and she perhaps an outsider, did what pleased God. She threw calculation, discretion, and embarrassment to the winds and prompted by her heart she expressed her gratitude and ministered to the Lord in blessing and thus helped Him beyond measure. How sweet and wonderful, and how right that to this day testimony is borne to her. The disciples said it was waste!

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26:6-13

No apology for tarrying with this passage. Its humanness fascinates. Did the woman have any idea of the magnitude of the service she was rendering? When the venom of the disciples sneered she must have cringed in apprehension. But there was no need. Jesus was smiling. He told her (and the others) that she had seen and understood the human cost to the Servant of God. As she was able she had told Him that it mattered to her and she expressed it. She had done something for Jesus. What a thrill. Maybe she could easily afford to do this, perhaps it cost her more than we know. But she did it and Jesus was pleased. Of course Jesus could have gone on without this blessed deed, but it lightened His burden. The disciples thought it a waste, especially with so many other deserving causes. But Jesus is not slow to point out that they could attend to them at any time but their opportunity to help Him was limited. We speak not of our own situation, but there are Christian office-bearers in many places who will regret their parsimoniousness after their ministers are dead and gone. There are people who think it an unjust penalty when the powers that be require them to pay their ministers more than the bare minimum for existence. The needs of Jesus were met by a grateful woman when official discipleship stood by in cold decorum and disapproval.

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26:14-16

Before we begin to deplore this deed of Judas, and before we criticise his evil bargain, remember that he was one of the twelve. We may say he did not realise the heinousness of his sin and the dread depths of what he was doing, and that may be true. But as a man, in relation to this Jesus and all He represented and claimed, Judas knew well the decision he was making. He was breaking with Jesus. It may have been the rebuke of Jesus or the sight of the woman's devotion that drove him to the actual crisis, or it may have been an awareness that if he did not get rid of this Jesus soon he would be found out and exposed as a hypocrite whose association with religion was in order to advance himself and his desires. How long his heart had been estranged from Jesus and how long his disaffection had been settling in we cannot tell. But it came out in the end. Note, however, that he did not stay away from the group of disciples. That would have been better. He came back to the heart of the group as a secret traitor; to brazen it out, using the friendship of men and of Jesus to help him to destroy them all. In the end he realised it was Judas who had been sold - to Hell. He went to his own place.

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26:17-25

How dark it becomes. No one but Jesus was aware that the traitor was in the midst. It may have been due to the cleverness of Judas' hypocrisy or on the other hand to the blind unperceptiveness of the disciples. When you are absorbed with yourself and removed from the costly agony of sharing the sufferings of Christ you lose all capacity for discernment. Who can really understand their distress as they asked one after the other, "Can you mean me, Lord?" It seems at that point Judas was silent, no doubt despising his fellows. Fine he knew who the betrayer was. Then Jesus spoke in v.24 words that should have shaken Judas to his depth as he was shown the true nature of his thinking and acting. Then in the face of that statement, looking arrogantly into the eyes of

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Jesus, Judas, who was then in the process of betraying Him, asked his blasphemous question. When quietly accused by Jesus (25), Judas shows no sign of shame or repentance. In the record in John 13:27 we read how Jesus commanded the man to do what he had devilishly purposed. Even then, the disciples seem to be unaware of what was transpiring amongst them. They were too staggered at the realisation of possible treachery in their own hearts. Get nearer to Jesus my Christian friends, you dare not trust your own heart.

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26:26-30

Considering the four records of the Gospel together it seems very probable that Judas sat at the Table of Remembrance with our Lord and His disciples and partook of both bread and wine. It is a thought that makes one shrink and could well lead to a spirit of judging and an over-scrupulous activity to keep the Table for believers only. But when you consider Luke 22:24 you see that the other disciples were far from perfect. No man is ever worthy to come to the Table and the Bible commands him to examine himself and so let him eat. Here lies the difference; failure, with its roots in pride and complacency can be forgiven and through the way of tears the soul restored. But treacherous betrayal can be forever. Even here Jesus points forward to a day beyond this when communion with Him and the Father and His children would be sweet in its perfection. Perhaps that is why Jesus' voice mingled with theirs as they raised their hymn or psalm of praise and worship, probably Psalm 118. We are left with the Son of God walking quietly and peacefully towards the Garden of Gethsemane. It is indeed mystery and mercy. Let earth adore and worship on this holy day.

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26:31-35

These familiar verses take on a new lustre and open great treasure to our hearts when we take time to read and ponder them. How unworthy is our hurried reading of the Scriptures. A thought for the mind is good but a moving of the heart and soul is better. Here is the fruit of Jesus' life's work: eleven men and He has to tell them that they will all temporarily desert Him. This is foretold in Zechariah 13:7, but Peter would have none of it. Dear, intense, over-eager Peter, and all the other disciples too, how little true discipleship has to do with vehement protestations of loyalty. Soon they will be asked to do a simple deed of human-kindness and they will fall asleep. When you fail on the human level you are not likely to succeed in the spiritual - that is harder. When the surging storm finally broke in the crucifixion not one of them remembered v.32. The one word they needed was missed because they were comparing themselves with each other and with the unbelieving world. Take heed how you listen to sermons. They may contain the very word you will need within twenty-four hours. Never despise sitting listening to Biblical teaching. You will need it all, come time.

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26:36-46

The time came, and with it their glorious opportunity to vindicate all their professions of loyalty, and they failed. Eight of the eleven were not even presented with the opportunity for Jesus knew it would be unfair to expose them in their weakness to such a trial of strength. That explains many closed doors in relation to Christian service. Now, don't refuse the message of the Word. Face the facts. You are not ready now, if indeed ever, and the fault does not lie with God. The three who were taken were out of their depth from the start. They not only failed to recognise this as the biggest thing in Jesus' life and ministry so far, they even failed to sense and thus to share the human burden, with the result that because of the failure of men an angel from heaven came to strengthen Him as He sweat great drops of blood. (Luke 22:43-44). He was alone, and reached forth His hand for the cup. Forget the disciples' failure and ponder our own unwillingness and unreadiness.

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26:36-40

We sometimes excuse the barren worldliness of our lives by thinking that for some choice souls alone spirituality is easy. The experience of our human Lord gives the lie to that. Look at the words: "sorrowful", "very heavy", "exceeding sorrowful even unto death" (AV). It was an experience that pressed down very heavily

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upon His soul. It was a burden. He was not unwilling. That is clear in v.39 where with realism He faced the awful cost and while His healthy human Person shrank from the pain, He yielded Himself to the Father's will. He told His own closest companions and asked them to help Him. He did not want instruction for He knew God's workings better than they did. He did not need exhortation to be faithful, for His heart was fixed. Neither did He desire release for no one else could drink this cup. What He wanted was tenderness of spirit like Mary's in v.7. But He looked in vain. cf. Psalm 69:20, Psalm 142:4 (AV). No man cared. That was it. They were asleep.

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26:41- 44

The sleeping disciples must have had great regrets when they realised that their supreme opportunity for service had been wasted. This moment would never happen again. But see how Jesus gently tells them not of their loss but their danger and we see startlingly clear the abiding conflict of flesh and spirit in the experience of the believer. When flesh dominates we sleep, fail, and are carried down the gorge into the jaws of temptation. If there had been a mighty crowd of people, with miracles and wondrous words, these men would not have slept. Neither did they sleep later when their persons were in danger. But watching death agonies does not appeal to the flesh and they slept, and without them the work of God was done. Something was accomplished then which they knew nothing of, and because of that, in a very short time they were unbalanced, panic-stricken, unnerved, in full flight and in the fear of defeat, while Jesus, who had known the cost, now manifested the calm of victory. There is a lot to be said for never being absent from the place of worship to which you belong (legitimate and necessary duty apart) in case you miss something. That is why many people do not understand our work in Sandyford with its systematic study of the Word backed by the Prayer Meeting. They see only snatches of it in between sleeps.

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26:45-46

Here is a man of courage who stands composed and peaceful as the rabble of devil-inspired and traitor-led men begin to encircle. This is true manhood indeed. But such a man is not hard and harsh. We must assume some lapse of time between verses 45-46, or half way through v.45. Now we see the depth of grace and kindness which makes us ashamed and yet gives us hope. Knowing the strains and tests ahead of them Jesus lets the disciples sleep on. The hour is come; the preparation made; the battle fought; the issue settled and Jesus sits and watches over His own beloved, blundering, failing disciples. Who can tell His thoughts as His eye rested on each of them in turn? It is a scene of blessed peacefulness but can we not sense a weariness in the sleepless Christ and are we not moved by the depths of manhood that show on His lined face? Rise, let us be going. Yes, in this final movement of the drama of redemption He took them with Him. They were still His. In all their failure He loved them to the end, but best of all He took them with Him.

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26:47-50

Men love the dark because their deeds are evil (John3:19), and you can be sure that if a man is afraid or unwilling to come out into the open to declare plainly what he is doing and why, then he is suspect. Policy and cunning, behind the back murmurings that seek to stir discontent, urging *others* to do the open deed of criticism and opposition, reek of the Devil and Hell, and Hell is very often clothed in religious garb. The priests and elders sat at home, their precious reputations kept safe in the sight of men who did not matter and who could change their loyalties as often as they changed their feelings. But God was watching, as He always is, and as the rabble approached Jesus had eyes only for the traitor. Then Judas kissed Jesus, on the face of it a token of friendship. Luke 22:48 says that Jesus forestalled him, and we hope the evil lips never touched the Master. But there is no hiding place for Judas and the grace of Jesus' word "Friend" simply exposed the enormity of the crime. Jesus command to go on and do what he had come to do should have shaken Judas. But it made no impression on this man, for his soul had no capacity for registering spiritual emotions at all. Then they came and laid their hands on Jesus and we can well understand the reaction of the disciples. But they were wrong, as

we shall see. Jesus was not taken by men, He went of His own accord. It was His hour, not theirs. But still the fact remains, one of the twelve betrayed Him with the sign of friendship. His professed love was a lie!

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26:51-56

We are very like the disciples. Jesus took them with Him and they all forsook Him when their persons were in danger. But was not Peter's action a commendable show of courage and a last ditch stand? No, for he was rebuked and told that he completely misunderstood. Peter's hour for service passed in Gethsemane, where in the greater and deeper issue he failed. To be virulent and active now on the lesser level was no substitute. It was too late and quite irrelevant. In fact, his face-saving bravado in loyalty to Jesus' person, prompted by genuine care and anger at the filthy hands of the mob, was frustrating the will and purpose of God. Jesus healed the man's ear and rebuked Peter for his silly show of strength which was in fact terror-stricken weakness. We said the other day that we get things all wrong when we fall asleep in the work of God. We need to learn when to strike and when to suffer in patience and to be led to the slaughter. John 18:4-9 tells of the mighty dignity of Jesus which paralysed the mob until they had to be urged to do their damnable work. It is Jesus' hour. He knows what He is doing and how He is to accomplish it. He always does. And sleeping disciples can be a real nuisance.

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26:57-68

These solemn readings are full of spiritual instruction. Learn first from the example of Jesus that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent (Eccles.3:7) and we must not allow ourselves to be goaded into speech by the contempt that comes from the Devil. God's Holy Spirit works sovereignly in the right way at the right time. Caiaphas and his gang were men with long ecclesiastical pedigrees but they were not of God. In the name of the justice of God they broke all the rules by holding a court at night, in passing sentence on the day of arrest and in procuring false witnesses. Mind you, they had great difficulty in getting their witnesses. There is a strain in accomplishing that which is not of God while the will of God has a straightforwardness that amazes. Verses 63-64 show how Jesus drew these men on until there was no going back for them, and forced them to reveal the truth about their attitude. They were against Him for what He was - the Son of God. Luke 22: 67-68 confirms that there was no real desire to know or obey the truth, and Jesus refuses to come down to the level of bandying words. That is unworthy as well as unprofitable and is to be remembered in what we call our witnessing. These hypocrites, hard and ruthless, made a show of religion in rending their garments, but then gave themselves away by their contemptuous mockery. They gloated in their triumph. But they were premature, for the end was not yet.

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26:69-75

Poor Peter, still bemused by the sleepiness of his soul if not his eyes, was there to see the end (v.58). Perhaps that spirit of defeatism had much to do with his denial. On the other hand perhaps it was his love for Jesus, or remembrance of his rash vow (v.35) that made him want to be near to Jesus as long as possible. But Peter was all wrong. He struck with the sword when he should have held his peace and he now tarries when, because of the perilous state of his soul, he would have been better to clear right out. Christian warfare is dangerous and no place for the unprepared. All Peter accomplished that night was shame to himself and grief to the Lord who heard his denial. Was Peter of the mind of so many Christians today that the worst would never happen: that there would be a last-minute reprieve of the situation and the Lord's followers spared the shame of the Cross? It can never be so, and if Peter had not been so much asleep, blind and unmindful of the glaring, evidence of the real situation he would have been better prepared. Peter's progress to denial was slow but none the less sure. Now, face the worst that may come, even Communist domination, are you sure enough of Jesus to face that or would you deny Him to save your skin?

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27:1-10

When morning came Judas had second thoughts about what he had done and what he was going to get out of his evil deed. In fact he seems to have been surprised at the turn of events. He too seems to have expected Jesus to turn the tables at the last moment, and now realises that his material, worldly tampering with holy things had cost him everything. When will people learn to stop trifling with what belongs to God? The best thing some could do is to leave every association with the house and work of God before they damn themselves. Judas saw in a moment that he had sold himself, not Jesus; sold himself to be a tool of men who in turn were tools of the Devil, who in turn is the unwilling tool of God. People say it is never too late to repent, but it was here, and in any case Judas went to his unholy partners in crime and not to Jesus his victim. He had always thought he could force Jesus round to his way of thinking, just as people try to force a church to be run their way. But it can never be so. Read Proverbs 29:1 and Acts 1:25. Judas went to his own place by his own choice and deed.

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27:1-10

The chief priests and elders had no second thoughts in the cold light of a new day and that reveals the hard calculation of their hellish designs. They had probably slept well and now with correct ecclesiastical and legal procedure, and with due pomp and ceremony (never deny ministers their little processions!) they set about their business. Jesus was in their power (as they thought) and soon He would be out of the way. Jesus in their power? How foolish can people get? If only they had seen the hollowness of their victory, the hand of God upon them to do His will, and the outworking of their own condemnation they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). But they did, and people still do on the same grounds. What contempt they had for Judas, the poor misguided wretch who had been their tool. It was a mockery of all that is holy that they felt their money (that bribed the betrayer) could not be put into the church collection because it was unworthy. It took a longer office-bearers meeting to deal with the cash than to decide to murder the Son of God. Religion!! And the world sees it and rightly despises it.

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27:11-14

The chief priests had to deal through the governor but they knew he was a weakling and were quite sure they could frighten him into compliance. They were right! The poor specimen was out of his depth from the start. Of course he was interested. The kingly manliness of Jesus was enough to fascinate Pilate who knew how to look for quality in soldiers. Was he genuinely interested in v.11 or was he mockingly credulous that such an one could be a king of anything? Did Pilate see that this Man could get the better of His enemies if He tried? And if so, did Pilate, like Judas, expect Jesus to turn the tables and thus free him from complicity and decision? No man can escape responsibility as easily as that. Pilate was puzzled, but he did not need to be for he had asked and received a straight answer in v.11. The difficulty was not even in his conscience for he knew well what he ought to do. His problem was weakness of will. There was not enough of the man in him to do the right thing with Jesus. You may pity Pilate, but you can never respect him. But Jesus was a real man. He commands respect as well as love.

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27:15-20

We follow the story slowly and find here a lesson for those who think they can prevent difficulty by finding a clever and appealing solution to every situation so that there will never be the clash of spiritual issues. It cannot be done. Pilate was a master of the art of evasion, but he failed. He saw that feelings ran high and that there was going to be a choice of taking sides and thus declaring one's loyalties and inevitably offending some who would make life difficult for him. He knew their envy but was too weak to deal with it (18). His wife knew he was a coward and tried to bolster him up a bit, for no woman likes to think she has an unmanly husband. But Pilate thought his idea a good one (17) and pressed on with it only to discover that it misfired and landed him a bit deeper in his predicament. He had to learn that division about Jesus was not a superficial matter concerned with people's human notions and sentiments. He had to learn that many of the best people have but one desire and

that is to destroy Jesus because He interferes with their lives and they want to be their own God. Yes, they want a God who lets them do what they like, and if Jesus stands in the way He must be destroyed. Pilate was blind to human nature as well as weak.

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27:21-25.

How could Pilate possibly imagine he was innocent? Read Luke 23:13-24 and see how he played into the hands of the Jews. They knew they had him in their power and if they just kept insisting then they would win. And they did, and all the ages of Christian history retell the story that Jesus was "crucified under Pontius Pilate". They chose Barabbas. We are told the name is really Jesus Barabbas, which means Jesus Son of the Rabbi. That made Barabbas one of their own clique and no matter the obvious criminality of his career nor the baseness of his character, they would have their own man rather than God's man. Things have not changed from then till now. Had the Jews only known the outworking of v.25 down through the centuries of anti-Semitism would they have paled in fear and desisted? We cannot tell. All we know is that here their fury and blind hatred knew no restraint. The more they saw and heard about Jesus the more they knew He had to go. To view this scene and still believe that it was Jesus' hour takes faith indeed. But it *was* His hour, and the Father watched and waited and suffered with the Son, and all heaven hushed in worship as Hell did its worst. This is the Cross we sing of so glibly.

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27:26-32

These verses are for meditation with hearts bowed very low in worship. It is not a nice story. The innocent victim is delivered by weak Pilate, mocked by cold religious Jewry and led away to be crucified. God the Father was there to watch and in the mystery of love to permit. God spared not even His own Son (Rom.8:32). Yes, it pleased the Lord to bruise Him. Read Isaiah 53 and get rid of all merely emotional thoughts about this Cross. Our blessed Jesus was there to suffer, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God by paying the price of our sins (1 Pet.3:18). And what a price! Even the reticence of the Scriptures fails to conceal the utter exhaustion of the Man Christ Jesus, and when He staggered under the weight of the Cross another man was hauled into service, a man who had paused to watch and wonder, Simon of Cyrene. He was the first man to share the Cross of Jesus Christ, and he was a dark-skinned man from North Africa. But there is more wonder than that. Simon's two sons were later converted (cf. Mark 15: 21; Rom.16:13). When you really get near to the Cross as opposed to just singing about it you can never be the same again.

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27:33-36

The first time the writer of these notes ever preached he took v.36 (AV) as his text on the Sunday evening. Now, as then, he finds the words exercise a quietening constraint on his heart and make him feel ashamed: ashamed of his sins and his sinning, his weak self-will and guilty pride, the feebleness of his love to this Jesus and the paltriness of his service. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, we were all there, the whole of humanity, with its drink and its gambling and its morbid interest in a spectacle of suffering. Where were all the fine feelings people are supposed to have for that which is good? Where is all the better nature, that babbling psychologists (and some preachers) talk about, that is only waiting to be drawn out by example and opportunity? It is not there. Here is the proof of the sinfulness of the human heart. They were there. They sat. They watched. And not a voice, let alone a hand, was raised on His behalf. It is still the same today; crucified still in the worldly neglect and contempt and patronising sneers of those not worthy to speak His name. Just you sit down today and watch Him there for you. Isn't it awful! For you, isn't it amazing!

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27:37-38

There is no need for lurid descriptions for the facts bear their own testimony to the awful scene. The King of Glory is on the gallows with His bodyguard of two convicted criminals. But His Holy Person stands out full of

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regal dignity while the rest of the scene demonstrates the base incomprehension and wickedness of humanity. Our present generation which has drained the Gospel of its dynamic theology and replaced it with weak sentiment speaks of the appeal of the Cross. What appeal? As a story it is one of tragedy and failure. We say it is moving, but they sat and watched ghoulishly. As the record of a good man done to death by his foes, it called forth the reviling and mockery of the passers-by. Mind you, it gave even cowardly Pilate courage to write the superscription and stand by it. Sentimentality can never understand the Cross; that needs theology, that is the word of God concerning it. The Son of God, the King of the Jews, spoken of through all the Old Testament and testified to by all the New Testament, hangs there and dies bearing the shame, guilt and penalty of all your sins and mine. Read Acts 2:23. You religious and profane men took Him and crucified Him. And what is more, He willingly bore it all because He knew what He was doing. He died. You live in Him. Dreadful story, especially when we can go on as if it had never been.

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27:39-44

Don't try to be shocked at this as if we would never do such a thing. Those passing by, the criminal underworld and many inside the Kirk all have this in common, they revile the Son of God. They even challenge Him to come down from the Cross and they would believe in Him. That is, they would tolerate Him and give Him a hearing provided the message of the Cross was left out. What a shock these perverse Pharisees would have got if He had come down! But that was not the way. It never is, and the Church of Christ has learned the folly of coming down at the call of unbelievers. She now finds herself cap in hand to middle-aged worldlings and pleasure-drunk younger people, with their demands. The contempt they poured on Him in these verses rouses anger in the heart, but that is not the way of Jesus. He answered them not a word. Death, with all its agony was the way to life, and He has left us a pattern for service. People will never understand it and will say to individuals and congregations that they must come down if the world is to believe. But Jesus did not come down. He died, and in dying slew sin and death and Hell and all their powers, and brought forth life. What a Cross!

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27:45-49

God the Father *was* there. Who other wrapped that sacred scene in dense dark cloud so that callous, worldly eyes should not gaze upon the pure Son of God in His final agony. The Father and the Son were alone in the last three hours of suffering, but the Father was hidden even from the Son. God spared not even His own Son. (Rom.8:32). The Father who watched Him all the way from Bethlehem, watched now, and it pleased the Lord to bruise Him. (Isa. 53:10). Yes God did it for you and me. Think of the Father's heart at the cry of v.46. Even men's hearts were touched and they offered Him a drugged drink to ease His pain. But some could not have cared less! What do you think of all this, or do you not dare to think? He was scourged and with His stripes we are healed. He was condemned and we acquitted. He was stripped that we might be clothed "in righteousness divine"(Wesley). He was reviled and rejected that we might be accepted. His was a crown of thorns and a death of agony that ours might be a crown of glory and a life of eternal blessedness. What almighty substitution. Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by? (Lamentations 1:12).

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27:50-56

His work was done and He dismissed His spirit. Then, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, there followed signs that startled everyone and opened the eyes of the centurion in charge of the execution so that he saw the Son of God and, we trust, believed unto life and forgiveness. Was that not a tremendous act of the grace of God? This man who had ordered the drugged drink to be given to the suffering victim, (perhaps the centurion himself was drugged to deaden the awfulness of the task he had been ordered to do by the Roman authorities) would have been the first man to be converted after Jesus died. He at least would never forget this day and in the wonder of his new found faith would ever remember the cost to this Man Jesus. Perhaps the man with the spear who wounded Jesus will have a place of special service in the glory of the Kingdom. If so, he will marvel forever at the grace-of God and will never be found whimpering complaints about the hardness of the Christian

way on earth. Once you have really seen Jesus you can never be the same. If you can, you have not really seen Him.

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27:50-56

Consider the mighty signs of wonder accompanying the death of our Lord. The temple veil that had so constantly symbolised the barrier between sinful man and the presence of his God was rent and the way was opened. cf. Hebrews 10: 19-22. Just think of it, an open way to God, through Christ who suffered the just for the unjust. But this is not merely a personal and individual thing for there was an earthquake as if some mighty hand had grasped the chains binding the very matter and fabric of creation in bondage and burst them asunder. The whole order of creation, the vast un-measured universe, only now being explored by ambitious sinners, whose power is given them from God, was ransomed in Jesus' death, although its final deliverance will not be until all the chosen saints of God are saved and gathered in (cf. Romans 8:18-22). In this scheme of things, even death and the grave have had their power wrested from them, for when Jesus died and entered their realm He was not just another victim for their jaws. Death had no claim on Him for He had no sin to warrant death (Acts 2:24) and He entered its palaces and conquered it, and perhaps the rising of some of the dead was a demonstration of His power (52-53). We believe these same saints returned to the abode of the dead either that day or after another spell of years to rest with Jesus in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body when the fulness of His time came. O death, where is thy sting? (1Cor.15:55-57) It is gone. What a Gospel, and what a mighty and glorious Cross.

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27:57-61

Amongst the women who watched from far off at the Cross was Mary Magdalene and she was there again at the grave where the kind and reverent hands of two men laid the Lord to rest. How pleased God must have been with these people. What could they do at the Cross to alter the course of events? What could they do now that their Master's body hung there lifeless? Nothing at all, except just to be there, and by their human care and ministrations show how they had loved Him. The love and loyalty of disciples cannot be tested by the amount or intensity of their speech. Peter was good in both these spheres; but when crisis comes, and there is no gain in befriending Jesus, the real people come to the fore and it is their humanity that impresses. The fact that the cause of Jesus now appeared publicly as a failure made no difference. The rich man had not been spoiled by his riches for he did not merely cause the burial to be attended to, he did it with his own hands. Joseph was one of the high and mighty (1Cor.1:26) who was called and his person, his love and devotion were adornments of the Gospel. Who was he? Consider Mark 15: 42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19: 38-42. Could he be the rich young ruler of chapter 19:16? Compare Mark 10:21. His companion was none other than Nicodemus. How wonderful. Jesus had certainly won their *hearts*, and that was everything.

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27:62-66

All was quiet and still except among the Pharisees who had won their victory only to find that they could not enjoy it. How frustrating! And, while Pilate sneered at their discomfort, God waited and smiled for the world of men was yet to know the last act of this mighty work. Did these unbelieving hypocrites have a sneaking fear that Jesus just might rise from the dead and turn the tables on them after all? There is no security of tenure or permanence in being on the side of the Devil. You can make it as sure as you can and roll as many boulders in the way as you like, but you cannot stop God doing what He has ordained and purposed for the good of His own people and work. IT CANNOT BE. But while you rejoice in this, if you are quite sure what side you are on, take a look at v.63-64. Can you credit such blind bigotry and hatred and refusal of all the manifest tokens and proofs that they had seen and heard? It is borne out wherever there is an authentic work of God being done to this very day. But these silly little men could not frustrate God. Every move they made proclaimed their antagonism to His purposes. Every move was countered simply and surely by God to their confusion and condemnation. And on the third day the grave was empty. But they did not repent. Read it right through the Acts of the Apostles. They tried to stop God but could not. They never can!!!

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28:1-4

The King is dead! Long live the King! But this is no *successor* to the throne. It is the King Himself who was dead and is alive again. Now, don't conclude you know all about this. You don't! Neither do I! But it is fact that has never been undone. On the third day He rose again from the dead, as He had said He would do so many times during His ministry. Get your Hymn Books (CH2) and read hymns such as number 122 (The strife is o'er...) and 125 (Our Lord Christ has risen...), to name but two of them. Now, are you excited? It **IS** true. The powers of death and hell, the massed powers of evil spirits led and directed by the Devil himself, have laid their plans, carried out their attacks, used bitter, hardened, cynical, empty-hearted professors of religion to do their work, and all their plans were allowed to work out to full and final end, and they lost the battle. Mind you they are still with us, the Devil, his demons, and his religious and irreligious men and women. They are still doing all that their fathers did before them (Acts 7:51-52). They do always resist the Holy Ghost, and they are always vanquished through our death and dying (2 Cor. 4:7-12). Don't forget that bit of the Gospel. It is costly but it works.

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28:5-8

The Chief Priests had taken care not to be there, just in case! The soldiers were quite out of their depth for they had not bargained on angels, just as people do not bargain on God's direct intervention in human situations. Pilate and his wife no doubt were somewhere arguing who was right, and the disciples were hiding. But the women were at the grave. No, they did not expect to find Jesus or angels. They were looking for a dead body that was more to them than all else, and while the guards were petrified by fear the women listened wonderingly to the heavenly messengers: "Fear not....I know....He is not here....come see....go quickly....tell....He goes before you"fear and great joy....and did run. Little wonder they ran. There was no dallying to examine the evidences and discuss the possibilities. Their spirits were quickened within them and they believed. HE IS RISEN. That is the fact that thrilled. Jesus was alive and their hearts knew no restraint and their feet sped along the road. "Ah," say the worldly wise, "it won't last, it is emotion, imagination stirred up in suggestible women." It won't last? But it did, and does, and grew and grew and grew and was filled with surprises.

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28:9-10

As the women went in eager obedience to the heavenly messenger Jesus met them. It was all too much, too big, too wonderful and panic began to stir within them. You see they had not really expected to meet Jesus, and having done so they wondered when He would leave them. But His word was, "Fear not". How often that appears in the Bible. It is as if He said "I am here, all is well and under control, let us proceed with the business we came to do". Note He said "us". The angel spoke of disciples in v.7 but Jesus spoke of brothers in v.10. They were scattered and full of fear but they were still His brothers. They were still the objects of His instructions and the instruments of His working, and as they obeyed they too would find Him right there with them and would see that this was no imagination or hallucination. It is all so wonderfully real and simple that it seems pointless to comment. He is waiting for us to go; He goes before us, and He journeys with us. That is what Sunday will mean for many. They will go to God's house and get home feeling better and cleaner and surer because Jesus had been speaking to them. Hallelujah.

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28:11-15

If there are men like these, then in the final Resurrection there must be a Hell as well as a Heaven. The messengers of the Resurrection came also to the Pharisees and produced a very definite reaction. Without hesitation exposing themselves for what they really were, these religious men gave a large amount of money as a bribe to commit perjury in the ears of the public, so that, regardless of the truth, their persons and positions might be preserved. These men, scribes, priests and leaders of Jewish religion, had been against Jesus right from

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the beginning. They had no place for Him in their scheme of things, for this reason among others: that He was too averse to compromise and would not co-operate with their human idolatry of self-will. Jesus just would not fit in. He was the man who changed things to serve the purposes of God, as they had experienced rather disturbingly at the cleansing of the temple. Therefore, whether it was true or not that Jesus was alive, and was the Son of God, and spoke the Word of God, they would not have anything to do with it. They did not give up their religion. That was one of their respectable hobbies. They just threw God out. Oh, caverns of Hell, prepared for the Devil and his angels, open your jaws wide for these men will come to you. It is *their* choice, for they are God-haters, and Christ-scorners. There is no truth in them.

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28:16-20

The blackness of the heart of the Pharisees is set off by the light of the two passages on either side. The eleven disciples, a small and almost pitiful band, wend their way to Galilee for this reason alone, that Jesus had told them to do so. Mind you, it was a Jesus most of them had not actually seen since His death, but they believed the word of the messengers. It was a Jesus they had all forsaken and failed, but they knew Him, and knew full well that no other person in the entire world would deal with failures with greater restoring kindness. And He was there waiting for them! In every situation He is always there first. Shall we ever get to the end of the marvel of this blessed Jesus? Picture it, perhaps as they rounded a bend in the road, and saw Him. Yes it *was* Him, and He rose to meet them. Was there a smile of exquisite kindness on His face? They worshipped *and* they doubted. Of course they doubted, for they were just like us. Peter doubted if the Lord could ever use such a loud mouthed failure as he had been. But listen. He speaks. "All power has been entrusted to Me. You goand surely I am with you always....even to the end of the world." Is that truth beginning to dawn on your heart today? He is with you. He trusts you, sending you to do His work. But what of all our sins, failures, psychological and emotional tangles? What of them? Look a little closer, dear disciples. See His hands and His feet; see the marks; there is your answer. It is forgiveness and hope. It is almost too good to be true. BUT IT IS TRUE. What relief. It makes heart soft and eyes moist, unless you are a Pharisee.

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28:16-20

The message and blessing of the Resurrection are not merely subjective and personal, it is objectively a word that concerns power. Not any kind of power, for some powers in the world are destructive and quite beyond the control of those who have initiated their operation. The world rightly fears its own inventions. What is being spoken of is the power of God, dynamic and irresistible, channelled into service, so that by the proclamation of the Truth as it is in Christ, the purpose for which the world and people were created might be brought to pass. Go, says God, and I go with you. What are we to do? Twice we are told lest we forget. Teach wherever you go, and teach all that I have commanded you. The more truth is expounded the more there is a vehicle for the operation of the Holy Spirit, and He alone can apply the Word and make it effectual unto salvation. It is by that same Word that we grow and mature as disciples (1 Pet, 1:23; 2:2; Heb.5:11-14 AV and NIV). We are not to harangue, but to teach, line upon line, precept upon precept. We are to tell a generation of people who do not know it the vast treasure of truth in the Bible. We are to range back and forth right through all the Scriptures, covering the ground, leaving nothing out (Acts 20:20,27AV). It is all His word and it must all be told. Go. Teach. Make it understandable (Neh.8:8). God is the only worker, and He is always there. He said it! And it is recorded in Scripture for all time!

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