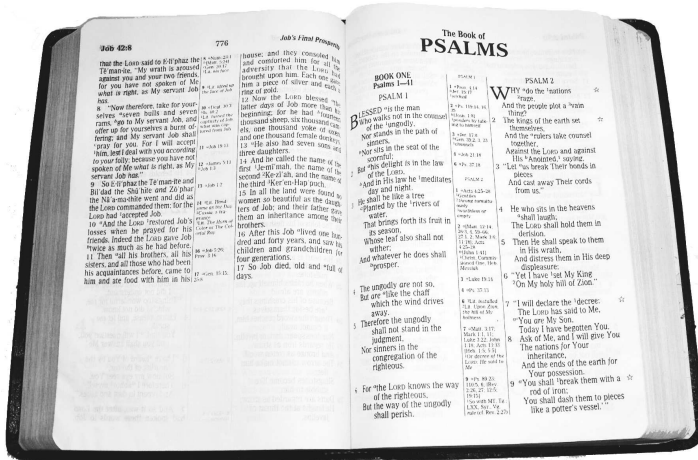


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



February 2019

Gospel of Matthew chapters 6 to 10

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

When you do a charitable deed

Dr Lloyd-Jones says of this chapter, ‘Here we have what we may call a picture of the Christian living his life in the world in the presence of God, in active submission to God, and in entire dependence upon him’ (STUDIES IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, volume 2, page 9).

Verse 1 introduces the message of verses 2 to 18. Some translations of this verse have ‘*practising your righteousness*’ rather than ‘*do your charitable deeds*’. The Lord Jesus shows how we should practise our righteousness. The problem with the Pharisees was that they wanted to be seen and praised by men when they gave to the poor (2–4), when they prayed (5–8) and when they fasted (16–18). We must not be like them! True religion seeks God’s glory rather than self-glory (5:16).

If we really love God, we will also love our neighbour (5:43–48). Jesus expects us to be generous in giving to the needy and the same teaching is found throughout the New Testament (eg. Acts 20:35; Romans 12:13; Ephesians 4:28; Hebrews 13:16). Jesus said, ‘*When you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets*’ (2). There is a kind of giving which is not really motivated by love for the needy, but by a desire for the admiration of others at our generosity. If we only give because we want people to think well of us, or if we want everyone to know that we are generous, our motives are sinful. Those who want the praise of men will get the reward they are seeking – the praise of men. They will have nothing from God, however (2).

Verse 3 means that when we give, we should afterwards forget about what we have given and get on with our lives. We are only able to show benevolence to others because the Lord has blessed us. All that we have we owe to his goodness. **Our Father in heaven sees our hearts, sees our motives, sees all that we do, and he remembers (4).** What great rewards await those who serve the Lord for his own glory (cp. Matthew 25:34–36)!

When you pray

The Lord Jesus now turns to the subject of prayer and he warns us against two dangers when we pray:

- He warns against hypocrisy (as he did with the subject of giving): *‘When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites’* (5). The human heart is so perverse that we can even make prayer an occasion for sin! The Pharisees loved to parade their eloquent, self-centred prayers (cp. Luke 18:9–14). They wanted to impress men, but they did not impress God. They had the reward they wanted – the applause of men (5). Our spirituality is not measured by the length or eloquence of our public prayers, but by our prayers in the secret place (6).
- He warns against using vain repetitions when we pray (7). Have you slipped into the habit of saying the same things every time you pray? If you have, write down some of the reasons why you should worship God and praise him. Find out about the latest needs of those for whom you pray. Think more about your prayers before you pray.

We may congratulate ourselves that we are not like the Pharisees, but we are all prone to hypocrisy concerning our prayer-life. It is all too easy to pretend that we are disciplined and faithful in private prayer when we know that we are not. Away with pretence! Let us be real with each other. It is a sad reflection on many of us that we are reluctant to come to the secret place to meet with our heavenly Father who sees in secret. **How wonderful that he rewards us when we come to him in prayer. What a privilege it is to be able to come to God in prayer!** We are able to come to him with confidence because he knows what we need before we ask him (8). This is not a reason for abstaining from prayer. We are commanded to pray here. We need to be in the presence of God. He is waiting for us to come to him; if we do not ask, we will not receive (James 4:2).

Our Father in heaven

In these verses, the Lord Jesus teaches us how to pray. The Lord's Prayer illustrates how we should *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (33) when we pray. Christian, do you realise just how great a privilege you have in knowing the almighty, sovereign, wise and good God as your heavenly Father? Make a note of all the verses in this chapter which speak of God as our heavenly Father. **The way we think about God makes all the difference to the way we pray!**

When we pray, we must remember our relationship to God. He is *our Father in heaven* (9) and he welcomes us to his throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). He delights in us and wants to receive our worship and our prayers (John 4:23; Luke 18:1). Though God is *our Father in heaven* we must hallow his name; this means that we should reverence, honour and exalt him. God's name reveals his character; he is holy and awesome in splendour and purity. We must never be familiar with God or sloppy in our worship like some who address God in prayer as 'Dear Dad'. In his great vision, the prophet Isaiah saw seraphim before the throne of God calling out, '*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory*' (Isaiah 6:3). Those sinless angelic beings hallow the name of the Lord. When we pray, let us remember always to come before the Lord with reverence!

If we love the kingdom of God (see verse 33), we will pray for the coming of that kingdom (10) through the spread of the gospel and the return of Christ (9:37–38; Revelation 22:20). Do you love to meet with God's people to pray for his work, which is after all a way of praying for the coming of his kingdom? When did you last pray for missionaries or for the success of the gospel in your locality? Prayer also involves submission to the will of God: *Your will be done*. If we are rebelling against God's will in our own lives, we can hardly pray sincerely and effectively. Prayer involves worship, adoration, a desire for the glory of God through the increase and coming of his kingdom; it involves submission to the will of God. **How do you pray?**

Forgive us our debts

Prayer not only expresses our worship but also our sense of helplessness and dependence upon God. We should be thankful for our food each day, and in times of plenty we must never forget that the Lord could remove everything from us in an instant. We should pray for *our daily bread* but not for luxuries. God is concerned for his children and he knows what we need (32). He promises in his Word that he will supply all our need *according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:19; cp. Romans 8:32). How wonderful it is to know such a loving God as *our Father in heaven*.

Just as we need to pray for *our daily bread* we need to pray for daily forgiveness of our sins. We all sin every day in thought, word and deed, or by neglect of Christian duties. Our sin puts us in debt to God. We cannot repay this debt, but the Lord Jesus has cleared it through his death at Calvary. We must pray, *'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'* (12). If we have truly repented of our sin, we will gladly forgive those who have wronged us and who seek our forgiveness (14–15). The Lord gives us no option but to have a forgiving spirit (18:21–35; Ephesians 4:32). Do you remember to seek God's forgiveness every day? Do you blissfully ignore your own sins while refusing to forgive others?

The prayer *'And do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one'* (13) recognises that God is sovereign in all our trials and temptations. *'Temptation'* is seduction to sin. It is important that we all understand that there is a difference between temptation and sin. Temptation only becomes sin when we yield to it. This prayer reminds us that we are vulnerable, that we must be on our guard and that we cannot defeat Satan in our own strength. **Every Christian can have confidence in prayer because God is his heavenly Father.** We may be weak, but he is strong. He reigns in sovereign power and majesty for ever. He cannot be toppled from his throne! *For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.*

When you fast

The Jew considered that there were three great works in the religious life — almsgiving, prayer and fasting. The Lord Jesus shows how we can easily become hypocritical in the way we engage in these works, having entirely wrong motives. We now turn to the subject of fasting.

The Jews were commanded to fast (to ‘*afflict*’ their souls – Leviticus 16:29–30) on the Day of Atonement. The word ‘*afflict*’ used in Leviticus 16:29 means ‘to humble’. Christians do not observe the Day of Atonement, but the practice of fasting is taken for granted: *When you fast* (16). The practice of fasting is found throughout Scripture and is often linked with prayer (eg. 1 Samuel 7:5–6; Ezra 8:21–23; Daniel 9:3; Acts 14:23). Fasting was practised in times of calamity and crisis (Judges 20:26; 2 Chronicles 20:3–4). When a church has a period of fasting and prayer it should be an expression of humiliation before God and of an urgent desire to see needs met. The leaders in the church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending Paul and Barnabas away on missionary service (Acts 13:3).

There are times when we should give ourselves to fasting and prayer; this involves abstinence from food and other bodily pleasures (Daniel 10:3; 1 Corinthians 7:5). The hypocrites (the scribes and Pharisees) wanted everyone to observe how pious they were as they looked sorry for their sins when they ‘afflicted their souls’ by fasting. Their glum appearance was designed to win the esteem of men, but it was all a ridiculous pretence. When you fast, do not let everyone know about it. Get on with your private fasting and prayer in secret. **Have you ever been so concerned for the desperate spiritual state of our nation or for other needs that you have been prepared to miss a few meals and give yourself to prayer and fasting?**

Let us remember that our heavenly Father sees all that we do. When we give to the needy, when we pray, when we fast, he sees in secret but he will reward us openly (4,6,18).

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also

Additional reading:– Luke 12:13–2

The Lord Jesus has warned us against hypocrisy (1–18) and he now turns to the subject of anxiety, its causes and its cure (19–34). Anxiety is often caused through having our treasures in the wrong place. We are either storing up treasures on earth or in heaven. Treasures on earth are not secure. They may perish through decay or be snatched from us (19). If we set our minds on obtaining riches, we are asking for trouble (1 Timothy 6:9–10). *‘The deceitfulness of riches’* chokes the Word of God in our lives and makes us unfruitful (13:22). The ‘prosperity gospel’ movement which teaches that it is every believer’s birthright to be wealthy and never to be ill is a denial of the Word of God. It promotes the very thing that the Lord Jesus warns against here! Should we then provide for our future? There is a difference between saving to meet anticipated needs and living for money. God led Joseph to lay up grain to provide for future years of famine in Egypt and he calls us to be prudent (Genesis 41:33–36; 2 Corinthians 12:14; 1 Timothy 5:8).

Bishop J.C. Ryle comments on these verses, ‘Worldliness is one of the greatest dangers that besiege men’s souls. It is no wonder that we find our Lord speaking strongly about it. It is an insidious, specious, plausible enemy. It seems so harmless to seek our happiness in this world as long as we keep clear of open sins! Yet here is a rock on which many shipwreck to all eternity ... Let us watch and pray against an earthly spirit. Open transgression of God’s law slays its thousands, but worldliness its tens of thousands.’ (DAILY READINGS FROM J.C. RYLE, PUBLISHED BY EVANGELICAL PRESS, Day 72).

It is foolish to set our minds on earthly possessions when we have a glorious inheritance in heaven (1 Corinthians 2:9; Ephesians 1:11,18; 1 Peter 1:4). We cannot take our worldly possessions with us when we die, but our heavenly treasure is for ever. **Where is your treasure? It is where your thoughts and affections are found.** Take time to think about this because Jesus warns us, *‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’* (21).

No one can serve two masters

Where would we be without our eyes? They alert us to danger so that we can avoid stumbling and enable us to appreciate the beauty of the world around us. A healthy eyesight is necessary in the spiritual as well as in the physical realm. The ‘eye’ in verses 22 and 23 speaks of our spiritual eye (or ‘mind’; cp. John 9:39–41; Ephesians 1:18). The unhealthy spiritual eye is focused on worldly things rather than the Lord (Proverbs 28:22) and it will bring darkness into our lives.

Sinclair Ferguson writes, ‘When you visit your physician, he asks a series of questions in order to diagnose your condition. When Jesus conducts his diagnosis of our condition, he also has questions: “Where is your treasure? On what is your spiritual vision focused? Who is your Master?” Our answers to these questions tell us a great deal about our spiritual well-being’ (THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, published by Banner of Truth).

Jesus warns us, ‘*No one can serve two masters*’ (24). If we live for riches, they will eventually master us! If we make an idol of money, we will soon despise God! The love of wealth brought disaster to the lives of Lot and Achan (Genesis 13:10–11; 19:30; Joshua 7:10–26). The Word of God is quite clear – ‘*You cannot serve God and mammon*’ (24; ‘*mammon*’ = ‘riches’). **Are you restless and uncomfortable in your Christian life? Could it be that you are trying to serve two masters, that you are trying to please God and man, that you are trying to serve Christ and the world? Divided loyalty is not acceptable to God.**

*Jesus, Master, whose I am,
Purchased thine alone to be
By thy blood, O spotless Lamb,
Shed so willingly for me,
Let my heart be all thine own,
Let me live to thee alone.*

(Frances R. Havergal)

Do not worry

Anxiety brings weariness and distress to many people and may make a child of God weak and prayerless. The words '*Do not worry*' are found three times in these verses (25,31,34). You may be free from the tyranny of seeking to heap up riches for yourself, but be over-anxious about providing for your basic needs. What is the answer to such worry? Jesus says, '*Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things*' (32). Life is more than food, drink and clothes. Will not God who has given you a body provide for its needs? (25).

God knows exactly what we need and he is not indifferent to our problems. The unbeliever often shrugs his shoulders when perplexed and carelessly utters, 'God knows.' The Christian can rejoice that his heavenly Father really does know, and that he loves him and cares for him (1 Peter 5:7). God did not spare his beloved Son but gave him up to die a terrible death to meet our greatest need which is forgiveness of sin and peace with God (Romans 8:32). Do you really think that he will let us down? Worrying will not improve our circumstances (26,31) but will so distract us that we may turn our eyes away from our heavenly Father. Are you beset by fears and care? **Turn your care into prayer (Philippians 4:6–7,19)**. Trust your Father in heaven. He will never fail you!

The Lord Jesus warns us not to be preoccupied with our bodily needs. Such behaviour is typical of those who do not have God as their heavenly Father (described as '*Gentiles*'; 32). We must be first and foremost concerned for our souls and the interests of God's kingdom. The tragedy is that so many of us are so materialistic and worldly that our souls are unhealthy through spiritual impoverishment while our bodies are unhealthy through over-indulgence. Look at the promise in verse 33. – '*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*' **Have you got your priorities right?**

Judge not, that you be not judged

One of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible is *judge not, that you be not judged* (1). It has been quoted as an excuse for turning a blind eye to wickedness or for avoiding church discipline. We must judge those who continually reject the ‘pearls’ of gospel truth (6) and those who are false prophets or teachers (15–23). We must use our judgment and test the spirits (1 John 4:1), comparing what we are taught with the teaching of Scripture. It does not mean that we are not to think or to have an opinion. The apostle Paul reminds the Corinthian church, ‘*He who is spiritual judges all things*’ (1 Corinthians 2:15).

What then is the meaning of verse 1? It is a warning against having a critical and censorious spirit. We must not become ‘Christian Pharisees’! It is very easy to find fault with other believers, especially where they are weak in those things where we imagine ourselves to be strong. The Lord Jesus used a humorous illustration in his warning. The hypocrite sees a speck of dirt in his brother’s eye and wants to remove it, while having a plank of wood in his own eye (3–5).

No Christian is perfect! We all have our faults, some of them sticking out in our lives like great planks. **We are not to be irritating busybodies, putting everyone else right. We are to busy ourselves in sorting out our own lives and repenting of our own sins.** The Word of God says, ‘*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you*’ (Ephesians 4:32). The Lord has placed pastors in the church to lovingly guide, rebuke and help us. Do not try to be a ‘mini-pastor’; it does not work! We can only put others right if we have earned their love and respect. In such cases, we will not be resented, but will be thanked for our care and counsel. We must also be certain that we can take rebuke as well as give it. *Judge not, that you be not judged.*

Do not give what is holy to the dogs

Jesus warns us against having a censorious, critical spirit which is always ready to condemn others, but fails to deal with our own personal sins and failings. We must, however, learn to discriminate between what is good and what is evil, between truth and error. There is a great difference between a Christian brother or sister (3–4) and those who scorn and reject the gospel and the precious Word of God. Such people are likened to dogs and pigs. The Lord Jesus says, *‘Do not give what is holy to dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces’* (6).

The dogs that roamed the streets of Galilee and Judea were not lovable family pets. They were filthy scavengers and were despised by the Jew and Gentile alike (cp. 1 Samuel 17:43; 2 Samuel 16:9). Pigs were also an unclean animal in the sight of the Jews (Deuteronomy 14:8). Dogs and swine are mentioned together as filthy animals (2 Peter 2:22).

William Hendriksen comments, ‘We are now able to conclude that here in 7:6 Jesus is saying that whatever it is that stands in special relation to God and is accordingly very precious should be treated with reverence and not entrusted to those who, because of their utterly wicked, vicious, and despicable nature, can be compared to dogs (see also Philippians 3:2) and hogs. This means, for example, that Christ’s disciples must not endlessly continue to bring the gospel message to those who scorn it. To be sure, patience must be exercised, but there is a limit. A moment arrives when constant resistance to the gracious invitation must be punished by the departure of the messengers of good tidings’ (COMMENTARY ON GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, pages 359–360).

Herod Antipas often heard John the Baptist (Mark 6:20), but he did not turn from his sin. When he later met Jesus, the Saviour did not have a single word to say to him (Luke 23:9). **Let us treasure the truth and wisdom of God’s holy Word (Proverbs 3:13–15) but beware of cheapening the gospel by pandering to the whims of scoffers or those who refuse to take its message seriously.**

Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them

The Lord Jesus sets very high standards and we cannot live the Christian life in our own strength. We must be people of prayer! God will not meet our needs if we do not pray and bring them to him (James 4:2). Jesus said, ‘*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you*’ (7). We all have needs and the Lord Jesus promises that if we ask, we will receive (8). Are you asking, seeking and knocking in prayer? Our heavenly Father encourages us to ask and to persist in prayer (‘*seek*’). He does not always answer us immediately or in the way we expect, but he knows what is best for us.

God is better than the best human father and he lovingly provides for us ((–11)! He gives *good things to those who ask him* (11). This is a great encouragement to pray and to persevere in prayer. Matthew Henry comments, ‘They that would be rich in grace must betake themselves to the poor trade of begging, and they shall find it a thriving trade’.

The Lord Jesus sets out what is known as ‘the golden rule’ – ‘*Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets*’ (12). It is the Law and the Prophets because it is based on loving our neighbour (Leviticus 19:18; Galatians 5:14). If we really love God and desire to please him, we will love our neighbour and always seek to do good to him.

We have already seen that the Lord Jesus warns us against cultivating a censorious, judgemental spirit: ‘*Judge not, that you be not judged*’ (1). We certainly want people to understand us and to make allowances for our faults and frailties. We should be prepared, therefore, to treat them in the same way, and to apply ‘the golden rule’. We must treat others as we would like them to treat us. If every Christian took seriously ‘the golden rule’ and lived by it, God would be glorified and we would know much blessing in our lives. **Are you living by ‘the golden rule’?**

Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life

Sinclair Ferguson in his book on Sermon on the Mount points out that verses 13 to 29 set before us choices in three different areas:

- The choice of the direction of our lives (13–14).
- The choice of influences (15–23).
- The choice of foundations (24–29).

The sermon is coming towards its end and the Lord Jesus now presses home its challenge to enter the kingdom of God: *‘Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it’* (13).

We all have to make a choice about the road we will follow in our lives. There is a wide gate and a broad way which leads to destruction (13). This is *‘the way of evil’* (Proverbs 4:14), the way of ‘doing our own thing’ which shuts out God (Proverbs 21:2). The frightening fact is that there are many who enter the wide gate to take the broad way to destruction. *There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death* (Proverbs 14:12).

There is a better way! Jesus said, *‘Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it’* (14). The gate is narrow because the Lord Jesus is the only way to God the Father (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). We cannot be saved unless we trust in Christ, turn from our sin, and follow him. The narrow way is difficult because it is a way of self-denial, of suffering and persecution (5:10–12; Luke 9:23). It is, however, the way that brings forgiveness of sins, peace with God, great joy, eternal life and heaven. If you are on the narrow way thank God for the great blessings that he has freely given to you.

If you are not a Christian, you are on the wrong way! Will you continue to follow the crowd on the easy way that leads to eternal separation from God?

Beware of false prophets

There are many voices and influences which seek to entice us to go on the broad way that leads to destruction. Many on that way are religious but they are not true Christians. Satan wrecks many a promising life through the evil influence of false teachers. Jesus warns us, '*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves*' (15). The apostle Paul described such people as '*savage wolves*' who do not spare Christ's sheep (Acts 20:28–31). How can we recognise false prophets and teachers? Jesus said, '*You will know them by their fruits*' (16). They teach error and they do not lead holy lives. The true servant of God is more concerned with the fruit of the Holy Spirit than in spectacular gifts, both in his own life and in the lives of those whom he teaches. It has been rightly said, 'The face of error is highly painted and powdered so as to render it attractive to the unwary.' You will have bitter fruit in your life if you allow yourself to be sidetracked by false teachers: *Beware of false prophets*.

False teachers often claim to be able to work miracles. Our reading contains a solemn and terrifying warning. On the day of judgment '*many*' will claim that they have prophesied, cast out demons, and done many wonders in the name of the Lord Jesus, but they will be cast out of his presence. There are '*many*' false teachers and we observe that they often outnumber the genuine servants of God. These false teachers deceive themselves as well as deceiving others (21–23). The day of judgment will be a day of shocks! *Beware of false prophets*.

The most important thing for every Christian is not the possession of spectacular spiritual gifts, but doing the will of God (21). Are you seeking to obey God's will as it is revealed in his Word? If you are not, how do you know that you are a Christian or whether your decision to follow Christ was genuine? **Beware of false prophets and beware of deceiving yourself.**

Whoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them

The people described in verses 21 to 23 have every appearance of being genuine Christians but they are false. We may profess the name of Christ and yet be lost. Prophesying in the name of Jesus will not save us – neither will the ability to perform miracles in his name. What is important is obedience to the Word of God (24; *‘these sayings of mine’*).

The parable of the two builders challenges us to consider the kind of foundation on which we are building our lives. The houses in the parable may have been constructed with the same materials and appeared similar, but their foundations were different! When the floods came and the storms battered the house built on the sand, it collapsed but the house built on the rock stood firm.

What is the point of this parable? The Lord Jesus warns us that hearing his sayings but failing to obey them will prove disastrous for us. It is not enough to say that we believe the Bible from cover to cover, or that we to listen to good preaching. **We must obey his Word (21)**. We must beware of deceiving ourselves (James 1:22). The Lord Jesus is teaching us that there is a false Christianity which makes no demands for commitment to a life of discipleship though it pays lip service to the teaching of Scripture. It attracts many but it leads to hell and not to heaven.

The people who heard the Sermon on the Mount were astonished at the teaching of Jesus. They recognised *that he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes*, but we are not told that they obeyed his words (28–29). Let us take God’s Word seriously and obey it. If we do not, our religion will not stand the test in difficult times. We will be like the foolish man who built on the wrong foundation and lost everything when the storms came. Jesus said, *‘Whoever hears these sayings of mine, and does them’* is like a wise man (24). **Are you building your life on the solid foundation of love and obedience to Christ?**

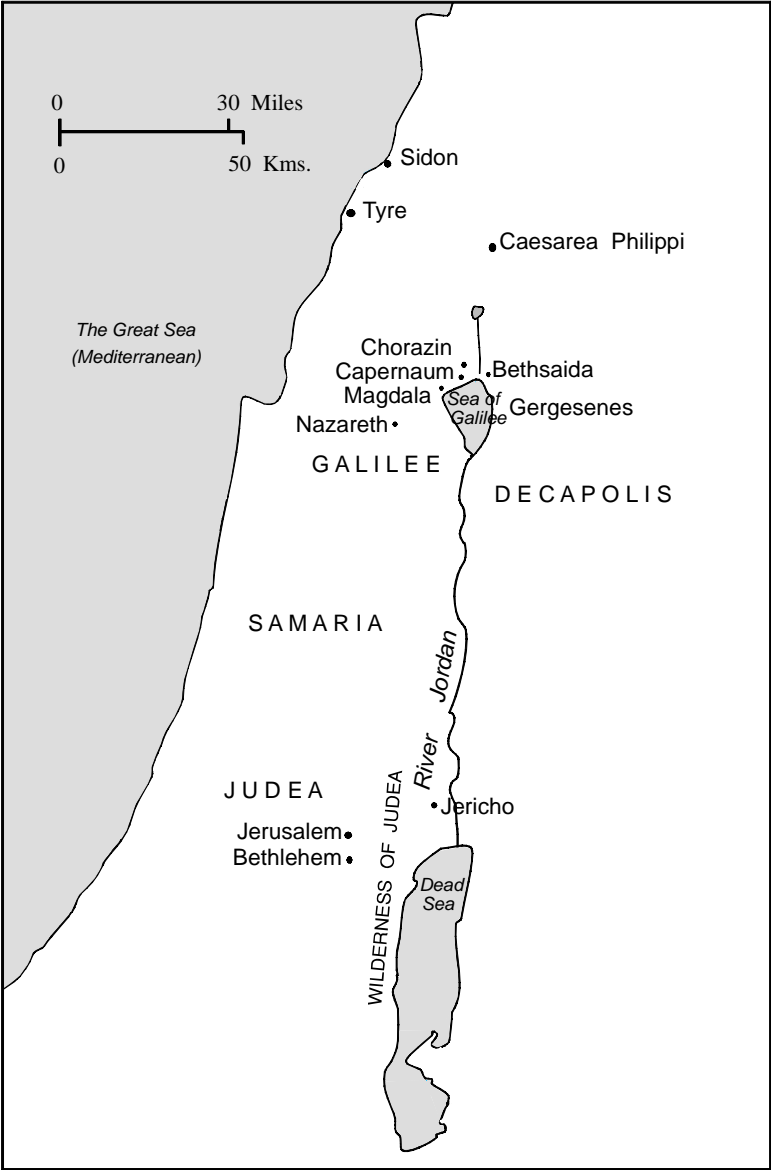
Lord, if you are willing ... I am willing

The greatness of the Lord Jesus was not only shown in the authority of his teaching (7:28–29) but also in his mighty acts. This chapter records several incidents which show his power over sickness, over nature (the storm) and over demons. Jesus is God! The leper confessed his confidence in Christ's ability to heal him but wondered if he were willing to do so. He asked, '*Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean*' (2). Leprosy was once much feared because it was incurable. Lepers were shunned lest anyone touching them contracted the dread disease. Jesus was moved with compassion for the leper (Mark 1:41) and touched him (3). That touch would have meant so much to a man who had not been touched for years (except by fellow-lepers). As soon as Jesus said, '*I am willing; be cleansed*', he was healed.

Jesus warned the man not to tell anyone of this miracle but to show himself to the priest (for ritual cleansing and confirmation that the disease had been cured so that he could return to normal life – 4; cp. Leviticus 14:1–32). In his zeal the man disobeyed the Lord and spread the news of his healing. As a result the Lord Jesus was restricted in his ministry by huge crowds and for a time was unable to go into cities (Mark 1: 45). We often suffer from the opposite problem – we are silent when we should be witnessing. Let us have compassion on needy sinners, but beware of an uncontrolled zeal which hinders rather than advances the work of the gospel.

Every person born into this world is afflicted by a plague far worse than leprosy. The most developed psychology and all manner of theories and therapies have failed to cure it. I refer to the plague of sin which will, if not cured, lead to eternal separation from God. The Lord Jesus died on the cross and shed his precious blood so that sinners could be cleansed and made whole. **If you are not a Christian, perhaps you may wonder if he is willing to forgive you? — If you come to him, he will never turn you away (John 6:37). He still says, '*I am willing; be cleansed.*'**

Sketch map showing places mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew



As you have believed, so let it be done for you

When Jesus came to Capernaum, he was met with a desperate and urgent request from a Roman centurion (an officer who commanded one hundred soldiers). His young slave was paralysed and in great torment (the Greek translated ‘*servant*’ here means ‘boy’). Luke uses the Greek word for ‘slave’ in his gospel and comments that he was very dear to his master (Luke 7:2). This centurion was a kind man who was distraught to see the young man so ill. Many men in his position in those days would have left the slave to die because a slave could easily be replaced. He was not only a man with compassion but he was also humble. He felt too unworthy for Jesus to come under his roof. As a man under authority, he recognised the greatness and the authority of Christ. He believed that just a word from Jesus was sufficient for his servant to be healed (5–9).

The Lord Jesus spoke to those following him and commended the centurion’s faith and said that he had not found *such great faith, not even in Israel*. The faithless Israelites (‘*sons of the kingdom*’) would be *cast out into outer darkness* on the day of judgment (10–12). What a fearful prospect awaits those who do not know Christ – the ‘*outer darkness*’ of hell. How we need to be sure that we belong to the Lord!

The centurion shows us the pattern for prayer:

- We must pray with humility, recognising that we are unworthy before God.
- We must trust in Jesus as the almighty God and take him at his word.

Jesus said to the centurion, ‘*As you have believed, so let it be done for you*’ (13) and the servant was healed that very hour. **Do you pray with real faith? Do you really believe in the promises of God that are found in his Word? – ‘As you have believed, so let it be done for you.’**

He himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses

After leaving the synagogue (Mark 1:29), Jesus went to Peter's home and healed his mother-in-law who was ill (15). At the end of the sabbath (at sunset), a great crowd gathered outside the house (cp. Mark 1:33). Jesus cast out demons with just a word and healed all who were sick. Notice that there is a distinction between ordinary sickness and demon-possession (16). The subject of demon-possession is quite controversial. There are modernists who deny the reality of such a thing, ascribing it to primitive superstition. On the other hand, there are extreme charismatics who teach that most of the problems in the lives of Christians are caused by demons and spend much time casting out these imaginary demons. We must beware of both extremes.

Verse 17 is often quoted by modern 'healers' to prove that the atonement provides healing of the body as well as of the soul. They reason that just as God would never turn away the repentant sinner, neither would he turn away the prayers of his people for physical healing if they have sufficient faith. Their understanding of Scripture is very muddled, but it allows them to blame the sick for their lack of faith when they are not healed. Notice that the Lord Jesus had a one hundred percent success rate (16)! He *healed all who were sick*.

What is the meaning of '*he himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses*' (17; cp. Isaiah 53:4)? Sickness and death came into the world through sin (Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12). The Lord Jesus died to deal with sin and its terrible effects. His death is for the redemption of our body as well as our soul. The redemption of the body will take place when he returns (Romans 8:18–25). Though the Christian is forgiven and cleansed from sin, he will not be free from sin or sickness until he reaches heaven (Revelation 21:4; 22:3). We still have our weaknesses and infirmities here on earth which God may not choose to heal (2 Corinthians 12:7–10; 1 Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 4:20). **God does heal today, according to his own will. How blessed is the believer who has learned to trust God in sickness and in health!**

I will follow you wherever you go

Another evening had come (cp. Mark 4:35) and Jesus was very tired and needing rest. Though he is God, he knew weariness and physical weakness when he was here in the flesh (24). Before he crossed the Sea of Galilee, two men came to him and both were challenged concerning discipleship. One appeared to be eager to follow the Lord, the other rather hesitant.

The first man, a scribe, had probably been moved by the wonderful teaching of Christ and through seeing some of his miracles. The scribes were generally hostile to Jesus but this man wanted to follow him and addressed him as his teacher. The Lord Jesus cautioned him and told him that discipleship demands sacrifice: *'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'* (20). It is very easy to say to Jesus, *'I will follow you wherever you go'* (19) but the way of Christ involves hardship and self-denial (20; cp. 16:24–25). We are not told how the scribe responded to this challenge. The Christian life is not easy and the Lord Jesus encourages us to count the cost of discipleship before following him (Luke 14:26–33).

The next man is described as *'another of his disciples'* (not one of the twelve). He had begun to follow Jesus, but he wanted to wait until his father died before giving himself to Christ in full commitment (that could have been years). I do not think that the man was actually in mourning for his father. Burials were quickly arranged in Palestine and the man would not have been in the crowd listening to Jesus if his father had just died. Jesus would not allow his excuse and demanded that he follow him there and then. **The devil is not too concerned about your good intentions but he will try to make things uncomfortable for you when you really begin to put God first in your life!** How is it with you? Is any person or any thing coming between you and the Lord? Are you following Christ and enjoying his peace in your life? **If you are putting off your commitment to follow him, do not delay any longer!** *Now is the day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?

The Sea of Galilee is about thirteen miles long and up to seven miles wide. It lies about seven hundred feet below the level of the Mediterranean. When cool currents of air sweep down from the surrounding hills, they collide with the warm air above the sea, whipping up fierce winds.

As Christ and his disciples crossed the sea, a furious storm arose and it threatened to capsize their boat. Though some of the disciples were experienced fishermen, they were terrified and woke up their sleeping Master (23–25). He said to them, *‘Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?’* He then *rebuked the winds and the sea. And there was a great calm* (26). The disciples had already seen him perform astounding miracles and they had experienced his care for them. How could they imagine that he would fail them now? The Lord Jesus is not just a man. He is almighty God who will never fail us nor forsake us. The disciples’ fear of the storm turned to a fear inspired by awe. They asked, *‘Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’* (27).

If we know the Lord, we have experienced his goodness to us and his power in our lives. We are often like the disciples, however, and we soon forget these things when the storms and trials of the Christian life disturb us. *‘Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?’*

*Begone, unbelief!
My Saviour is near
And for my relief
Will surely appear.
By prayer let me wrestle
And he will perform;
With Christ in the vessel
I smile at the storm.*

*His love in time past
Forbids me to think
He’ll leave me at last
In trouble to sink*

(John Newton)

When they saw him, they begged him to depart from their region

The Gergesenes (28) lay to the east of the Sea of Galilee. Some manuscripts read ‘Gadarenes’ which are to the south of the sea (eg. ESV; NIV), but Hendriksen points out that the country of the Gergesenes has many caves which are suitable for tombs. Matthew mentions two demoniacs, but Mark and Luke only refer to one. There is no contradiction. Mark and Luke do not say that there was only one but rather focus on the one who wanted to follow Jesus (cp. Mark 5:18–20).

When Jesus and his disciples came ashore in the Gergesenes, they were met by two demon-possessed men who were wild and fierce through demonic power. The Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign over demons and here the demons were terrified of him (29–31). They knew that everlasting torment awaited them and they asked Jesus if he had come to torment them before that time (29). It is a frightening thought to know that all who die without Christ will go to that place *prepared for the devil and his angels* (25:41; cp. Revelation 14:11). Is your heart right with God? Are you sure that you will spend eternity in heaven with Christ?

At the command of Jesus, the demons left the men and entered a herd of pigs which ran over the cliffs to perish in the sea. The terrified swineherds fled to the city to tell their story (33). All the people of the city went to meet Jesus, but they did not welcome him. They did not bring their sick for healing, but *begged him to depart from their region* (34). **It is tragic that men and women, blinded by Satan and enslaved in sin refuse God’s offer of mercy.** Jesus said to those who rejected him, ‘*You are not willing to come to me that you may have life*’ (John 5:40).

Jesus, seeing their faith

The Lord Jesus crossed the sea of Galilee and came to his own city (Capernaum; he no longer dwelt at Nazareth, 4:13). Four men brought a paralysed man to him for healing. They could not get near to him because of the crowd around the house. These resourceful men took the man up an outside stairway to the roof of the house. They opened up the roof and lowered him on his mattress (the Gospel of Mark supplies the extra details; Mark 2:1–12). *Jesus, seeing their faith* spoke kindly to the man, forgave his sins and healed him (2, 6–7).

The scribes rightly recognised that the Lord Jesus was claiming to be God when he told the man that his sins were forgiven. They thought that Jesus was blaspheming because God alone can forgive sins. Jesus knew what they were thinking (he also knows our thoughts) and he rebuked them (3–6). The Bible plainly teaches that the Lord Jesus is God, but many false cults deny this. The title ‘*Son of Man*’ is also a title of Deity (6; cp. 26:64–65; Daniel 7:13–14).

The four men recognised that their paralysed friend had a great physical need. When they brought him to Jesus, an even greater need was met – his sins were forgiven! *Jesus, seeing their faith*, which was not put off by seeming obstacles (the crowd thronging the house), honoured that faith. It was a faith that persevered. – *Without faith it is impossible to please him* (Hebrews 11:6). **What kind of faith does God see in you? Do you have the faith that perseveres in prayer for your loved ones and friends who do not know the Lord?** Let us look on obstacles as an opportunity to prove the faithfulness of God!

*Doubt sees the obstacle,
Faith sees the way;
Doubt sees a long dark night,
Faith sees the day.*

*Doubt dreads to take a step,
Faith soars on high,
Doubt thunders, ‘Who believes?’
Faith answers, ‘I.’*

He arose and followed him

Matthew (his other name, Levi, is used in Mark and Luke's Gospels) now gives us an account of his own conversion. He was a tax collector and such people were hated and despised because they worked for the Romans who occupied their country. They also had a reputation for being dishonest and corrupt. As long as they collected an agreed amount of tax for the Roman authorities, they could overcharge and keep the surplus for themselves. The tax payer had no right of appeal. The scribes and Pharisees put them on the same level as the worst of sinners and wrote them off as far as salvation was concerned (11).

The Lord Jesus called Matthew, one of these social outcasts, to follow him and to be one of those most closely associated with him (14). His other name, Levi, means 'attached'. The tribe of Levi was attached to God in a special way, being set aside for the service of God. They provided the priests and teachers of God's law and others involved in the service and ritual of the temple. Matthew Levi had not attached himself to the Lord's work but to serve the heathen Romans. Can you imagine his amazement to hear the great teacher, the holy Son of God, saying to him, '*Follow me*'?

Matthew *arose and followed him* (9). He gave up a comfortable living to become attached to the Lord Jesus. He did not become a secret believer, but made a great feast to which he invited many other tax collectors where he introduced them to his Saviour (10). They too followed the Lord Jesus (Mark 2:15; cp. Luke 5:29). **Are you glad to own Jesus as your Lord before your friends and colleagues at work? Do you earnestly desire and pray for their salvation?**

No one is beyond the reach of God's mercy. Christianity is for sinners, but the churlish, self-righteous Pharisees did not recognise their own spiritual need. Jesus told them, '*I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance*' (12–13). He does not call the righteous because there are not any righteous people (Romans 3:10)! We are all sinners and he calls us to repentance. How is it with you?

They put new wine into new wine-skins

Some of the disciples of John the Baptist and of the Pharisees were puzzled that the disciples of Jesus did not fast and asked him, ‘*Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?*’ (14). He replied that fasting was inappropriate for his disciples, comparing his presence on earth with a wedding feast. A Jewish wedding in Bible times was a very festive time. The couple who were married did not go away for a honeymoon but stayed at home. An open house was kept and the bridegroom and his bride were treated like royalty as their closest friends shared all the joy and feasting of the week. These close friends were called ‘the children of the bride-chamber’ (translated here as ‘*the friends of the bridegroom*’).

The Lord Jesus was comparing himself to the bridegroom and his disciples to the bridegroom’s closest friends. How could they fast and mourn? They were with the almighty Son of God. They were seeing corrupt tax officials like Matthew coming to faith in Christ and their lives completely transformed. There was daily rejoicing over sinners repenting. The Lord Jesus went on to speak of the bridegroom being taken away: ‘*But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast*’ (15). He was speaking of his death on the cross, but that mourning would not last for long (John 16:16–22); it would be replaced with joy at his resurrection.

Jesus said that a new cloth patch would soon pull away from an old garment as it shrank in the wash. New wine would burst an old wineskin as it fermented because the old wineskin could not stretch like a new one (16–17). We are not saved by patching up our lives with good works: *They put new wine into new wineskins*. When a person is saved by grace, they are a new creation in Christ and the old things have passed away (2 Corinthians 5:17). The garments of the old life are replaced with the garments of salvation (Isaiah 61:10). **The new wine of salvation must be poured into the new strong wineskins of joyful thanksgiving and sacrificial service which glorifies God.**

Your faith has made you well

Mark and Luke give more details of the two miracles recorded here by Matthew. They also tell us that the ruler of the synagogue was named Jairus and that his daughter was twelve years old. The well-being of a synagogue and the order of its meetings were the responsibility of its rulers. Mark and Luke also inform us that Jairus had first asked Jesus to heal his daughter, but then a message came informing him of her death. Jesus encouraged him not to despair, but to believe (Mark 5:35–36). Jairus then expressed his trust in Jesus to raise his daughter from the dead (18).

As Jesus went to the house of Jairus, he was interrupted by a woman who had suffered twelve years of misery through continuous haemorrhages. This poor woman had spent all that she had in search of a cure, but her condition had grown worse rather than better (Mark 5:26). She had suffered repeated disappointments in the past, but she was confident that the Lord Jesus could heal her, even if she only touched his garment. He turned and said to her, *‘Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well’* (22). God is pleased when we really trust him in all circumstances (cp. Hebrews 11:6).

When Jesus affirmed that the girl was not dead but sleeping, the professional mourners at Jairus’ house *laughed him to scorn* (24). They misunderstood him; what he was saying was that death would not have the last word (cp. John 11:11–14). Jesus put them out of the house and raised the child from the dead (25). If you read Mark 5:22–43, you will see the love and tenderness of Jesus in his dealings with the woman and with Jairus. **We have a wonderful Saviour! Let us worship him and trust in him at all times!**

*One there is above all others,
Well deserves the name of Friend;
His is love beyond a brother’s,
Costly, free, and knows no end:
They who once his kindness prove,
Find it everlasting love.*

(John Newton)

According to your faith let it be to you

The need for faith is again emphasised in the healing of the blind men. Although they did not have physical sight, the eyes of their understanding were enlightened. They were able to ‘see’ that Jesus was not just a prophet. They recognised him as the promised Messiah when they addressed him, ‘*Son of David.*’ They were persuaded that he was able to heal them and they called on him to have mercy on them. He did not at first respond to their call and they followed him to the house where he was staying (27–28). He challenged them, asking them if they really believed that he was able to heal them. They said that they did, and touching their eyes, Jesus said, ‘*According to your faith let it be to you*’ (29; cp. 8:13). The men were instantly healed and though warned to keep quiet about their healing, they spread their good news.

A demon-possessed man was then brought to Jesus. The demon had rendered him dumb and the crowd marvelled when Jesus cast out the evil spirit so that the man began to speak. This was a wonderful miracle but miracles do not convince those who hate Jesus. The Pharisees responded by blasphemously asserting that Jesus cast out demons through the power of Satan (32–34). They had physical sight but they were spiritually blinded by their own sin and prejudice (cp. John 9:39–41). There are none as blind as those who do not want to see! **How is your faith? Do you really believe that the Lord is able to meet your needs when you come to him in prayer? – ‘According to your faith let it be to you.’**

*Come my soul, thy suit prepare,
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He himself has bid thee pray,
Therefore will not say thee nay.*

*Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring;
For his grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much.*

(John Newton)

The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few

The fame of Christ spread because of his teaching and his miracles (8,26,31,33) and he continued to heal every kind of sickness and disease (35; cp. 4:23–24). Jesus looked on the multitudes with great compassion. They were like scattered sheep without a shepherd (36). Why was this when they had the temple, synagogues, priests and scribes? The problem was that their teachers were spiritually blind. The hungry sheep were not being fed. The situation is much the same today. How do you look at the challenge that faces us? Do you despair at the confusion around us and the indifference to the gospel, or do you see a plentiful harvest? Do you feel compassion for the lost? Do you long for them to know your precious Saviour?

Andrew Bonar was a godly Free Church minister in Glasgow in the nineteenth century. He was a great evangelist and soul winner. God so blessed his labours that their church building became too small and they had to build another church which was opened in 1878. The verse, *He that winneth souls is wise* (Proverbs 11:30) was inscribed in Hebrew over the door of the new church building. Why in Hebrew? Andrew Bonar was hoping that some Jews would see the Hebrew and come in and find Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

Jesus said, *'The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few'* (37). **Are you praying that the Lord of the harvest will send out labourers into his harvest (38)? Are you prepared to labour for God, to spend and be spent in his service (2 Corinthians 12:15)?**

*Go, labour on; your hands are weak,
Your knees are faint, your soul cast down;
Yet falter not; the prize you seek
Is near — a kingdom and a crown.*

*Toil on, faint not, keep watch and pray;
Be wise the erring soul to win;
Go forth into the world's highway,
Compel the wanderer to come in.*

(Horatius Bonar)

Freely you have received, freely give

The disciples had spent much time learning from Jesus and had seen all that he had done. Jesus had urged them to pray that God would send out labourers into his harvest and he now sends them out to preach, to heal the sick and to cast out demons (1). The names of the disciples are given, the last being Judas Iscariot, *who also betrayed him* (2–4). Matthew Henry comments, ‘Christ knew what a wretch he was, that he had a devil, and would prove a traitor; yet Christ took him among the apostles, that it might not be a surprise and discouragement to his church, if, at any time, the vilest scandals should break out in the best societies ... but there is a day of discovery and separation coming, when hypocrites shall be unmasked and discarded’. Bartholomew is the alternative name for Nathanael (John 1:43–51) and Thaddeus is the name given to Judas son of James. Simon the Canaanite is also referred to as Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:14–16).

The disciples were sent out in pairs (Mark 6:7) and were to restrict their ministry to the Jews, *‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’* (5–6). Their message was to be the same as the message of Jesus – *And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’* (7; cp 4:17; 9:35). The Lord Jesus said, *‘Freely you have received, freely give’* (8). We too have received salvation with all its blessings. We owe it to God to freely give ourselves in his service. The disciples were to have a simple and sacrificial lifestyle and to look to traditional eastern hospitality for their provision (9–13).

The Lord Jesus told his disciples that when a house or city rejected them and their message, they should shake off the dust from their feet (14). This refers to the Jewish custom of shaking the dust from their sandals and clothes before re-entering the Holy Land after passing through Gentile territory; this was to avoid ceremonial uncleanness. By shaking the dust from their feet, the disciples were giving a symbolic warning that God would surely punish those Jews who rejected the gospel. They were unclean and were no better than Gentiles (cp. Acts 13:49–51). **Are you rejecting Christ? Beware!**

Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves

The Lord Jesus left his disciples under no illusion about the cost of following him. They were weak and frail, but he chooses to use those whom the world considers weak (1 Corinthians 1:27). The warnings and encouragements that he gave to them continue to apply to all who would serve him: *‘Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves’* (16). Like the disciples, we too go as sheep among wolves (sheep are helpless and vulnerable but wolves are ferocious) and we face opposition and all kinds of dangers (16). We need much wisdom, discernment and gentleness. Jesus said, *‘Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves’* (16).

Jesus warns us that we will be hated by all kinds of people for his sake (22). Persecution will come from those who are religious (17), from the state (18), and even more hurtful and distressing, from within our own families (21). The Holy Spirit is with us and will help us (19–20) and we do not need to fear those who hate us (26). Christ’s disciples must follow his example and live out his teaching; like him they will be accused of belonging to Satan (*‘Beelzebub’*, 24–25). We must not be daunted by persecution (23) and our Master encourages us not to fear the enemies of the gospel (26). When early Christians were forced to flee from one city, they went to another and spread the gospel (Acts 8:4; 11:19). If Christians were attacked and imprisoned where you live, would you stand up and be counted? Would you refuse to deny the Lord Jesus who died to save you from your sins?

The latter part of verse 23 is not easy to understand. Jesus did not mean that he would come again before the twelve had preached in all the cities of Israel. The gospel must first be preached in all the world before the end comes (24:14). **The Lord Jesus was pointing out that persecution will come in every age, but we must continue to follow him and persevere in our work for him** (22).

