

But they made light of it

This is the third parable spoken by Jesus following the challenge of the chief priests and elders to his authority (21:23; 28-45). He showed that they were mistaken in their belief that they were in the kingdom of God (21:31,43). Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. The invited guests spurned the invitation but the king showed great patience. He sent out other servants to urge all those who had been invited, to come to the feast, *but they made light of it* (1-5). Some were too busy and others were so hostile that they killed his servants. The furious king sent his soldiers to destroy the murderers and to burn up their city (6-7).

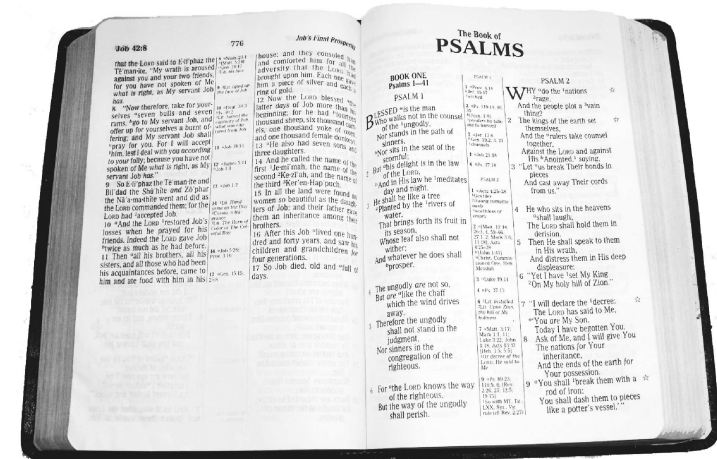
Jesus was warning of the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem, which had repeatedly rejected God's messengers, killing his prophets and finally his Son (cp. Luke 13:34-35). The Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70 after the Jews had rebelled against them. No mercy was shown and more than a million Jews (including women and children) who had crowded into the city were massacred.

The king extended his invitation to all whom his servants could find, *both bad and good*, and the wedding hall was filled with guests (8-10). This points to the gospel being taken to the Gentiles after the Jews rejected Christ. The king saw a man at the feast who was without a wedding garment and when the king questioned him, he was speechless. The intruder was cast into outer darkness (11-13). The Lord Jesus said, *'Many are called, but few are chosen'* (14).

The wedding garment speaks of Christ's righteousness which has been imputed to all who trust in him for salvation (Romans 4:22-25; cp. Isaiah 61:10). If you are not trusting in Jesus alone to save you, you are deceiving yourself. **Have you accepted God's gracious invitation to come to Christ and to be saved, or do you make light of it?** If you reject Christ now, do not be surprised when he casts you out of his presence on the day of judgment. *Be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure* (2 Peter 1:10).

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



May 2019

Matthew chapters 14 to 22

They will respect my son

The parable of the wicked vine-dressers is a parable of the history of the Jewish nation which had enjoyed the special care and goodness of God for centuries. He had given them good laws and had favoured them above other nations, but they still rejected him. *They mocked the messengers of God, despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets* (2 Chronicles 36:16). The servants in the parable represented the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist.

A householder planted a vineyard and leased it to vinedressers who were to provide him with its fruit, but they ill-treated his servants, killing some of them (33–36). The man then sent his son to them, saying, *'They will respect my son'* but the wicked vine-dressers killed him (37–39). The Lord Jesus was revealing what was to happen to him that very week. The Jewish leaders did not respect the Son of God. They were plotting the most terrible crime of all – the murder of the sinless Saviour. Just as the owner of the vineyard destroyed the wicked vine-dressers, so the Jewish nation would be rejected and the kingdom given to another people. Jesus, *'the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner-stone'* (42; cp. Psalm 118:22–23; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:6–8). The builders rejected the chief corner-stone from which the whole building took its alignment. Jesus warned that if this stone fell upon them, they would be crushed (44).

The chief priests and the Pharisees recognised that Jesus was speaking of them. They wanted to lay hands on him but held back for fear of the crowd who recognised Jesus to be a prophet (45–46). Later that week, they arrested Jesus at night and handed him over to the Romans to be crucified. Just over forty years later, the nation of Israel was destroyed when their rebellion against the Romans was crushed. More than a million Jews were slaughtered and another million sold into slavery. **Do you respect the Son of God by obeying him, by giving him first place in your life?** One day, every knee will bow to him (Philippians 2:9–11). It is far better to submit to him now, than to be punished by him on the Day of Judgment!

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The notes for 1 May are included with those for April

By what authority are you doing these things?

The Lord Jesus had cleansed the temple and healed the sick (12–14) but the chief priests and elders questioned him about his authority: ‘*By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?*’ He told them that he would answer their question if they would answer a question that he would put to them (23–24). His question was about the ministry of John the Baptist: ‘*The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?*’ (25).

They refused to answer Jesus, however, because they had not believed John. They knew that if they acknowledged that his ministry was from God, Jesus would ask them why they had refused to believe him. John had pointed the people to the Lord Jesus, telling them that he was the promised Saviour (eg. John 1:29–34). If they openly denied the validity of John’s ministry, they feared that the crowd, who regarded John as a prophet, would turn on them. They refused to answer the question of Jesus and he then refused to answer their question (26–27).

The Lord Jesus then told a parable of two sons (28–32). Their father told them to work in his vineyard. The first refused but later put matters right with his father and went to work in the vineyard. The second son promised to obey his father, but failed to do so. Jesus asked the chief priests and the elders, ‘*Which of the two did the will of the father?*’ and they correctly answered, ‘*The first*’ (31). Jesus then took up his question about John that they had refused to answer. He told them that tax-collectors and harlots would enter the kingdom of heaven before them, because they believed John the Baptist. Many of these people had repented at the preaching of John; they were like the first son in the parable. They would enter the kingdom of God ahead of those who had plenty of outward religion (likened to the second son), but who did not believe John and who refused to repent of their sin.

How is it with you? Have you gladly submitted to the authority of the Lord Jesus over your life, or are you religious and lost?

The king was sorry

Herod the Great, the tyrant who had sought to kill the infant Jesus, had ten wives. He bequeathed his kingdom to three of his sons — Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee and Perea. Another son, Philip, ruled over the north-eastern territories of the kingdom, and Archelaus over Judea and Samaria. Archelaus was deposed by the Romans who then imposed direct rule over Judea and Samaria in AD 6 (Pontius Pilate became governor of these territories in AD 26).

When Herod Antipas heard about Jesus, he thought that John the Baptist had risen from the dead (1–2). The king was living in adultery with Herodias, wife of his brother Philip, and John had fearlessly denounced him for his sin. The enraged king had imprisoned John, but the evil scheming Herodias wanted to kill him. She was unable to do so because Herod respected him and also feared the reaction of the people who counted John as a prophet (3–5; cp. Mark 6:17–20). Herod also *feared John ... and heard him gladly* (Mark 6:20) but he did not repent of his sin.

Herodias had her revenge when Herod made a rash promise to her daughter. She had pleased the king while dancing before him at his birthday banquet. In the presence of his guests, he promised to give her whatever she desired. Herodias prompted her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter (6–8). The macabre request was granted and John was executed. *The king was sorry* (9) but he did not have a godly sorrow which leads repentance (cp. 2 Corinthians 7:10).

Herod had silenced John but he was unable to silence his own conscience. He wanted to speak to Jesus, but when the opportunity came, the Lord had nothing to say to him (Luke 23:8–9). He had squandered his opportunities to repent. **It is not enough to be sorry for the consequences of our sin, we must forsake it and obey God!**

*The notes for January 2018
contain an introduction to the Gospel of Matthew*

He was moved with compassion for them

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Christ recorded in each of the Gospels. We learn two wonderful things about the Lord Jesus from this miracle; it reveals:

- His great love and compassion.
- His great power.

The twelve disciples had just returned from a preaching mission (Mark 6:12–13, 29–30). At the same time, Jesus heard the dreadful news of the murder of John the Baptist (12–13). Jesus and the disciples had been so busy that they had not had any time to eat. They needed rest and refreshment and they went by boat along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee to a deserted place. There was no escape from the huge crowds, who went by foot around the shore to await the arrival of the Jesus (13; cp. Mark 6:30–31). When Jesus saw the huge multitude, *he was moved with compassion for them*, and he healed the sick among them and healed their sick (14). He also taught them many things (Mark 6:34).

When evening came the disciples wanted Jesus to send the multitude away to the surrounding villages to buy food for themselves. He told them, *‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat’* (15–16). The disciples said that they had only five loaves and two fish but Jesus blessed those loaves and fish and miraculously multiplied them to feed the people. Five thousand men, besides women and children had more than enough to eat and twelve baskets were filled with the remains of the meal (17–21).

The Lord Jesus is wonderful in his power and compassion. He became man, knowing grief (eg. over the death of John the Baptist), hunger and weariness, but he would not send away the needy crowd until they had been fed (16). **Child of God, Jesus knows about you and about all your needs and burdens. He is full of compassion and love for you (Hebrews 4:14–16).** Come to him and cast *all your care upon him, for he cares for you* (1 Peter 5:7).

Whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive

The Lord Jesus was staying in Bethany, two miles outside of Jerusalem (17). This was a fig-growing area; *‘Bethphage’* (1) means ‘house of figs’. Returning to Jerusalem the next day, Jesus saw a fig tree which stood out for its rich foliage. It should have had its early crop of small figs growing from the previous year’s shoots. These figs would have been ripe and ready for eating. Jesus was hungry but he found nothing but leaves on the tree and he cursed it (19). The barren fig tree provided a solemn lesson. Israel, a ‘fig tree’ planted by God and cared for as no other nation, was barren and was ripe for judgment. **If our religion is all outward show, bearing no fruit, we must question its reality.**

The disciples marvelled that the fig tree withered so soon after Jesus cursed it. He told them that if they had faith and did not doubt, they would do similar miracles: *‘If you say to this mountain* (the Mount of Olives), *“Be removed and cast into the sea”* (the Dead Sea), *it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive’* (21–22). Jesus is telling us that faith is essential when we pray. Great faith was linked with moving mountains (17:20; cp. 1 Corinthians 13:2). The Puritan, John Trapp, wrote, ‘Faith is the foundation of prayer, and prayer is the fervency of faith. Faith and prayer are the soul’s two hands, whereby she begs and receives from God all things, both for this and a better life.’

The promise of verses 21 and 22 is an encouragement to trust God when we pray. Some people foolishly take this promise as a blank cheque to claim from God health and wealth for themselves, and then they wonder why their prayers ‘bounce’. God will not listen to greedy, selfish prayers (James 4:3). The promise must be qualified by 1 John 5:14 – *‘according to his will.’* There is a wonderful promise in Psalm 37:4: *Delight yourself also in the LORD and he shall give you the desires of your heart* (4). **It is important to note that when we delight ourselves in the Lord, our desires will be God-centred rather than self-centred.**

A den of thieves

The Jews had become so corrupt in their religion that the temple precincts were more like a market-place than a place of worship. A Jew could bring his own sacrifice, but this was not practical for those pilgrims who had travelled many miles to Jerusalem. Those who had permission to sell sacrificial animals were obliged to pay a generous commission to the temple authorities. They sold animals and birds at about eighty times more than their true value and the Jewish leaders were guilty of allowing such corrupt practices.

Male Jews were obliged to pay a half-shekel temple tax (cp. 17:24–27; Exodus 30:13), but it had to be paid with Jewish coins. Roman coins were inscribed with the head of the Roman emperor whom the Romans worshipped as a god. These coins were strictly forbidden in the temple building and the moneychangers charged exorbitant exchange rates. Religion was used as a means of fraud. The precincts of the temple which had been consecrated for the worship of God, had become little more than a market place. The Lord Jesus drove out all the traders *and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves*. He quoted the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah saying, *‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer,” but you have made it a den of thieves’* (13; cp. Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11).

The blind and lame came to the Lord Jesus, and he healed them. The children, taking up the words they had heard from the multitude, cried out in the temple, *‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’* (14–15; cp. verse 9). The words *‘Son of David’* acknowledge Jesus as the promised Messiah and the chief priests who saw the miracles were angry. They rejected the holy Son of God because they were more at home in a *‘den of thieves.’*

We long for and pray for revival, but when the Holy Spirit comes in power, shallow religion is exposed and cleared out, and it is painful. Let us be sure that our Christianity is living and real.

It is I; do not be afraid

Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him to cross the Sea of Galilee to Gennesaret (22,34). He sent the multitudes away and then spent time alone in prayer before walking on a wind-tossed sea to the disciples’ boat. They were terrified when they saw him, believing that they had seen a ghost. Jesus calmed them, saying, *‘Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid’* (25–27). The Greek for *‘It is I’* (*‘egō eimi’*) is literally, *‘I am’*, which is the covenant name of God (Exodus 3:14). The Jews recognised this when Jesus used the expression on another occasion, and they attempted to stone him for blasphemy (John 8:58–59). Jesus is God! His enemies understood this, though they rejected his claims (cp. John 5:18).

Peter’s venture into the stormy sea was not a foolhardy act of faith. He was beckoned by Jesus to walk on the water and all was well until he saw the strong wind around him. He began to sink and he cried out, *‘Lord, save me!’* Jesus took him by the hand and as they got into the boat, the storm abated. The amazed disciples knew that their Master was no ordinary man. He is the Son of God who is worthy of our worship (28–33)!

The disciples had no need to fear when their Lord was with them, They were greatly amazed at the demonstration of the his power over the sea, but hadn’t they already seen his divine power in multiplying the loaves and fish (cp. Mark 6:51–52)? **Why should they have feared when they had with them such a mighty Saviour? Why should we fear when we have the same Saviour?**

When Jesus and the disciples landed on the shore of Gennesaret (which is just to the south of Capernaum) they were soon surrounded by huge crowds seeking healing. Everyone who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment was healed (56). They too recognised that Jesus was no ordinary man. Have you come to faith in the Son of God? Have you experienced his power in your life, saving you from your sin and transforming you?

Their heart is far from me

Some scribes and Pharisees had come to Galilee from Jerusalem and they questioned Jesus, asking why his disciples did not perform the ritual washing of hands before eating a meal (2). In this ritual, hands were washed in a special manner to cleanse from any religious defilement caused by contact with Gentiles in the market-place (cp. Mark 7:1–5). This traditions had no biblical basis. The scribes and Pharisees meticulously observed the tradition of the elders and were quick to condemn those who did not share their scruples. The Lord Jesus applied to them the words of the prophet Isaiah, *‘These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’* (8; cp. Isaiah 29:13).

The scribes and Pharisees observed religious tradition but they set aside obedience to the commandment of God (9). Jesus reminded them how they used tradition to disobey the fifth commandment. They would claim that money that should have been used to support their elderly and needy parents had been dedicated as a gift for the work of God. They thus avoided honouring them by providing for them (3–6). If we do not provide for our own family, we deny the faith and are worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

The disciples were concerned that Jesus had offended the Pharisees (2,12). He pointed out that they were *‘blind leaders of the blind’* (13–14). We should not be surprised when the plain teaching of the Word of God offends many religious people who are blinded by their own traditions. Jesus stressed the importance of heart righteousness. Jesus called on the multitude around him to understand that we are not defiled by the food entering the mouth but by what comes out of the mouth (11). Peter asked Jesus to explain what this meant (15). Jesus said that food eaten with unwashed hands has no effect on the state of a man’s heart (his soul, character, mind and will). The human heart is a breeding ground for all kinds of sin (17–20; cp. Jeremiah 17:9). **We may be very religious and yet have a heart which is far from God. How real is our Christianity?**

Who is this?

When Jesus reached the Mount of Olives near to Jerusalem, he sent two of the disciples to bring him a donkey with its colt. The animals obviously belonged to a follower of Jesus. He was willing to respond immediately to the disciples’ words, *‘The Lord has need of them’* (3). Do you respond immediately to needs in God’s work which you are able to meet?

Why did the Lord Jesus go into Jerusalem, riding on the colt?

- It was to fulfil Scripture. These events had been foretold by the prophet Zechariah (4–5). The waving of the palm branches was associated with joy (Leviticus 23:40). Jesus was welcomed as the messianic King (Zechariah 9:9).
- Jesus went to Jerusalem to die. He had warned his disciples on three separate occasions that this was so (16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19). He did not come secretly into Jerusalem to avoid being arrested. He came quite openly because it was God’s time for him to go to the city. *‘Hosanna’* (9) means ‘save now’. The words of the crowd, *‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!’* are taken from Psalm 118. The same passage in the psalm also speaks of his rejection by the people and of a sacrifice being bound to the altar (Psalm 118:22–27). Jesus went to Jerusalem to die on the cross as a sacrifice for sinners. He died as the Lamb of God to take away sin (John 1:29).

The entry of the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem made such an impact that the Passover pilgrims asked, *‘Who is this?’* (10). The multitudes answered, *‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee’* (11). They acknowledged that Jesus was a prophet, but they did not understand that he was the King who would save sinners through his death on the cross. **Do you only acknowledge the Lord Jesus as a prophet, or do you know him as your Saviour?**

What do you want me to do for you?

Mark and Luke in their Gospels focus on just one blind beggar, Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43). The two blind men, like the two healed in Galilee (9:27–31), saw what the scribes and the Pharisees failed to see – that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. When they addressed Jesus as ‘*Son of David*’ (30–31), they were giving him the title of the Messiah (or ‘the Christ’ – God’s anointed One; cp. 22:41–42). The blind beggars had faith in the greatness, the power, and the willingness of the Lord Jesus to heal them. This is the pattern for us when we pray. We should always come to the Lord, trusting in his willingness and in his power to answer our prayers.

The men also had a persistent faith which did not give up when faced with discouragement. When warned to be quiet, *they cried out all the more*. Jesus then stood still and called the blind men to himself. He asked them, ‘*What do you want me to do for you?*’ They did not ask for wealth so that they would no longer need to beg. Their greater need was for sight and the Lord Jesus gladly granted their request. They were healed immediately and they followed Jesus (32–35).

If the Lord said to you, ‘*What do you want me to do for you?*’ what would you say? Do you bring your greatest needs to God in prayer? Think about the wonderful promise in Romans 8:32: *He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?* If God loved us so much that he did not spare Jesus but gave him to die for us, do you think that he will turn a deaf ear to the prayers of those who love him and obey him? Read Philippians 4:19; Hebrews 4:14–16 and be encouraged.

*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)

Great is your faith!

Jesus and the disciples left the Gennesaret area of Galilee to go north to the region of Tyre and Sidon where a Gentile woman came to the Saviour pleading that he cast out a demon from her daughter (21–22). At first, Jesus did not answer her, and the disciples asked him to send her away (23). He told her that he had been sent only for the lost sheep of Israel, but she worshipped Jesus, pleading with him to help her (24).

Jesus said that the ‘*children’s bread*’ was not for ‘*the little dogs*’ (in other words, he had come to minister to the Jews). His attitude toward the woman may appear to be harsh, but he was testing her faith. She continued pleading, pointing out that the ‘*little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table*’. She asked for some crumbs and her faith pleased the Lord Jesus. He said to her, ‘*O woman, great is your faith*’ and he delivered her daughter from the demon (25–28). We do not read of any work of Jesus when he was in this region; it appears that he went there just to reach this distressed woman.

Faith is important because without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Those who have great faith focus their trust in God, who is great. Strong faith also perseveres in the face of discouragement. The Canaanite woman persisted in seeking the Lord’s help until her prayer was answered. God often delays answering our prayers, but we must never stop praying. The Lord tests our faith in order to strengthen us, but we must always remember in testing times that he loves us and that he cares for us. **How great is your faith?**

We may feel that our faith is small but little faith is better than no faith at all and it can become great faith. We have a great Saviour; let us trust in him in our trials and difficulties and he will bless us.

*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.’*

(Author unknown)

I do not want to send them away hungry

The Lord Jesus left the region of Tyre and Sidon and returned to Galilee where he healed many people of serious and incurable ailments and God was glorified (29–31). He had compassion on the multitude and he told the disciples, ‘*I do not want to send them away hungry*’ (32). They asked him, ‘*Where could we get enough bread in the wilderness to fill such a multitude?*’ (33).

The disciples had just seven loaves and some small fish and thought it impossible that the crowd could be fed (34). They had not learned from the feeding of the five thousand (14:15–21). They did not have the ‘*great faith*’ of the Canaanite woman we met in yesterday’s reading. Jesus commanded the multitude to sit down and he gave thanks for the loaves and fish, and the disciples then distributed the food. Four thousand men, besides women and children, were miraculously fed and seven large baskets were filled with the remains of the meal (35–38).

Some people claim that there are contradictions in the Bible. They struggle to give us an example when challenged to prove their case. They may say that in one place the Bible records the feeding of the five thousand, but in another place it is four thousand who were fed. They display their ignorance of Scripture because there are two distinct miracles, and there is no contradiction (cp. 14:13–21; 16: 9–10). Those who scoff at the Bible are very perverse. Even miracles would not convince them of its teaching (cp. Luke 16:29–31).

There is very little famine in the western world but the spiritual need is immense! There is a famine *of hearing the words of the LORD* (Amos 8:11). Religion without true godliness and power does not satisfy those who may have spiritual hunger. Do you have any compassion for those who are lost? Are you concerned that they will spend eternity in hell unless they are saved through the Lord Jesus? **Let this be your concern, that you do not want to send anyone away from you still having unsatisfied spiritual hunger.**

You do not know what you ask

As Jesus and his disciples were going to Jerusalem, he predicted his death and resurrection for the third time (17–19; cp. 16:21; 17:22–23). James and John and their mother then came to him with a request. The two brothers wanted to sit either side of Jesus in heaven (20–21). They wanted the best and the most exalted place. Jesus answered them, ‘*You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*’ His cup was one of appalling suffering (cp. 26:38–39) but James and John insisted that they were able to drink of such a cup (22). They did suffer for the Lord! James was killed by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1–2). John, who lived longer than any of the twelve disciples, suffered persecution spent the end of his life in exile (Revelation 1:9).

The Lord Jesus told James and John, ‘*You do not know what you ask*’ (22). We often do the same thing when we pray. We may ask God to give us a position in the church which would be disastrous both for us and for the church. We may ask for things which would only hinder our walk with the Lord. Our heavenly Father delights to hear our prayers, but we do not always realise the implications of our requests being granted. It is for our good that he doesn’t always say, ‘Yes’, or answer us in the way we expect.

We must beware of seeking power for ourselves. Selfish ambition and pride has wrecked many a church. It was little wonder that the other disciples were *moved with indignation against the two brothers* (24). Jesus said that the way to true greatness lies in humbly serving our fellow Christians (25–28). If we deny ourselves and take up our cross (16:24), selfish ambition will be kept in check in our lives. *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself* (Philippians 2:3). The Lord Jesus is our great example. Let us follow him (John 13:1–17; Philippians 2:5–8)!

Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?

The Lord Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a landowner who hired labourers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay the first group of workers the normal daily rate of a denarius for their twelve hours labour (2). Others were hired at 9.00 am (the third hour), 12.00 midday, 3.00 pm and 5.00 pm. They all agreed to work for what the landowner considered to be right and those who had worked less than twelve hours were no doubt surprised and delighted to receive a full day's pay. After seeing the generosity of the landowner, those who had worked for the full day, expected to receive more than the agreed rate. They complained when they too received a denarius. They had worked not just for an hour like some, but had toiled in the burden and the heat of the day. The landowner pointed out that he had done them no wrong for they had agreed to that wage (10–13).

Jesus did not explain the meaning of this parable but we should view it in the context of Peter's question, '*See, we have left all and followed you. Therefore what shall we have?*' (19:27). The parable is preceded with the words, '*But many who are first will be last, and the last first*' (19:30). The Lord Jesus repeated the same words when he finished telling the parable, adding a further statement, '*For many are called but few are chosen*' (16).

In the kingdom of heaven God's rewards for service are all of grace. Like the landowner he says, '*Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?*' (15). What lessons are there for us here? We must beware of envying other believers when God appears to bless them more than he blesses us. **Rewards are an incentive to serve the Lord (19:29; cp. Hebrews 11:24–26) but we should count it a wonderful privilege to serve God who has graciously saved us from our sins.** The Lord will give rewards to the faithful on the day of judgment. That day will also bring many surprises: '*So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen*' (16).

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees

The Pharisees and the Sadducees had seen ample evidence of the mighty power of the Lord Jesus, but they came again asking for some miraculous sign from heaven. Jesus condemned these hypocrites for their wilful unbelief and repeated his assertion that the only sign that would be given them was the sign of the prophet Jonah. They were again being promised the greatest sign of all, the resurrection of Christ from the dead (1–4; cp. 12:38–42).

The disciples had forgotten to take bread with them and were puzzled when Jesus warned them, '*Beware of the leaven (yeast) of the Pharisees and the Sadducees*' (5–7). They may have thought that Jesus was forbidding them to accept bread from these people, but he was warning them against their doctrine (12). The Pharisees were proud and lacking in compassion. They were more concerned for their man-made tradition than for loving God and obeying his Word. Their religion was loveless and lifeless. The high priests and many of the priests were Sadducees. They did not believe in the resurrection of the body, in angels or demons, in judgment, or in heaven and hell.

The warning of the Lord Jesus is most important for us today:

- We must beware of any teaching which adds to Scripture by doctrines or traditions which deny God's Word ('*the leaven of the Pharisees*').
- We must also beware of '*the leaven of the Sadducees*' which takes away from Scripture by denying the death and resurrection of Christ for sinners and of judgment and hell ('modernism' as taught by many of today's religious leaders). Such '*leaven*' saps a believer of spiritual vitality. Perhaps we feel that we are sound in doctrine and that we do not need to be warned about these things. '*The leaven of the Pharisees*' also includes the sin of pride. There are many Christians who are sound in doctrine but who are puffed up. Remember, *God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble* (James 4:6). **Let us beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.**

But who do you say that I am?

Jesus north to Caesarea Philippi with his disciples where he asked them, ‘*Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?*’ They replied that some thought him to be John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets (13–14). People continue to have different opinions about the Lord Jesus. Some say, ‘He is the founder of Christianity.’ Others agree that ‘he is a great religious teacher’ or ‘a wonderful example to follow’. Many recognise him as ‘a prophet’. All these answers are inadequate!

The Lord Jesus knows our thoughts (cp. 9:4; 12:25), so why would he ask the disciples about the opinion of others concerning himself? The answer is that it matters little what others think about Jesus. What is all important is what you think about Jesus! He was using the first question that he put to the disciples to make way for his next question, ‘*But who do you say that I am?*’ (15).

Peter’s confession, ‘*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*’ (16) acknowledged Jesus as:

- The Christ, the Messiah promised through the prophets of the Old Testament (Luke 24:27; 44–45; Acts 28:23).
- The Son of God. This is a title of deity (John 5:18). He is God (John 1:1–3; Romans 9:5). Any religion that denies that Jesus is God is a false religion.

Peter was blessed because God the Father had revealed these things to him (17). Do you understand the importance of God’s revelation, of knowing that Jesus is the almighty, holy, sinless, perfect Son of God and that he came into the world to die on the cross to save sinners? Jesus told the Pharisees on one occasion after they rejected his claim to be the Son of God: ‘*If you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins*’ (John 8:24). If you remain mistaken about the identity of Jesus, you cannot have eternal life. You will die in your sins and you will be lost for ever. **Who do you say that Jesus is?**

With God all things are possible

The disciples were *greatly astonished* at the comments of the Lord Jesus as he warned that riches are a great hindrance to any who want to go to heaven (23–25). Jesus said, ‘*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*’ (24). Some commentators have explained that the eye of a needle was a very narrow and low gate into the city through which a camel had to struggle on its knees if it was to gain entry. This theory was first propounded in the 11th century AD and it is without foundation! The verse means what it says and it is for this reason that the disciples *were greatly astonished*. They asked, ‘*Who then can be saved?*’ Jesus reassured them with a glorious truth: ‘*With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*’ (25–26).

No one is too difficult for God to save! The Lord Jesus very soon demonstrated this truth to his disciples when he saved Zacchaeus, who was very rich and also a chief tax collector (Luke 19:1–10). Tax collectors were generally wicked cheats and as far as many Jews were concerned, they were beyond redemption. **We must never lose heart when we encounter people who are hard or indifferent to the message of the gospel.** The Lord is able to soften the hardest of hearts and save the vilest sinner. He can easily break the chains of sin which enslave people. We may think, ‘Impossible,’ but Scripture says, ‘*With God all things are possible*’ (26). Let us persevere in prayer and in evangelism! The Lord has many a surprise for those who wait upon him.

Peter began to speak about their commitment in following Christ. He asked, ‘*Therefore what shall we have?*’ Jesus replied, ‘*Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit everlasting life.*’ This promise is for ‘everyone’ (27–29). Earthly treasures and pleasures may be sacrificed, but what can compare with God’s blessing upon us, with eternal life and treasure in heaven?

He went away sorrowful

The young man who came to Jesus was rich and esteemed in religious circles; he was a ruler (probably an official in charge of the local synagogue, Luke 18:18). He called Jesus ‘good’ which was a confession that Jesus is God (16–17). He asked Jesus, ‘*What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?*’ (16). He may have sincerely felt that he had kept the ten commandments but he was ignorant of the state of his own heart (20). We sin and break God’s commandments from a very early age! His wealth was a great idol in his life and a proof that he was guilty of breaking the first commandment which forbids us to have any other gods (Exodus 20:3). He also failed to understand that salvation is by grace and that our ‘good works’ cannot save us. Had the young man been ready to give away his wealth, it would have been an evidence of his repentance and trust in Christ.

The man was wealthy and religious, but these things did not meet his deepest need. Why was this? – He wanted eternal life (16), but he also wanted to hold on to his possessions. His wealth was his ‘god’ and no one can serve two masters. His riches meant more to him than his religion. We cannot serve God and riches (6:24). *He went away sorrowful* (22) because he was not willing to face up to the cost of following the Lord Jesus. This involves getting rid of anything that has become a ‘god’ in our lives.

Becoming a Christian is more than ‘making a decision for Christ’. It means taking up the cross (Mark 10:21)! The cross is a symbol of self-denial, of shame, of suffering, and of death. We must die to the old selfish life if we want to be disciples of Jesus. We must embrace his lordship. **If he is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all!** Many have drawn back from following Christ when challenged with the cost of following him. There is a price to pay for treasure in heaven, but what blessing is enjoyed by all who truly follow the Lord Jesus. There is a greater price to pay for refusing to follow him – an eternity of separation from God!

I will build my church

We repeat yesterday’s reading to focus especially of verses 18 and 19. The Lord Jesus told Peter that he was blessed to receive the revelation from God the Father that Jesus is ‘*the Christ, the Son of the living God.*’ He then went on to say to him, ‘*And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it.*’ Does this support the claim of the Roman Catholic Church that Peter was the first pope? Not at all!

There is a play in verse 18 on the Greek words ‘Petros’ (Peter) which denotes a piece of rock or a stone that may be moved and ‘petra’ which denotes an immovable mass of rock. It is important that we understand the church was not built on Peter. Jesus alone is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 5:23. His church is built *on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone* (Ephesians 2:20).

The ‘*keys of the kingdom of heaven*’ speak of authority and Peter’s authority in the early church is not disputed. He preached the sermon on the Day of Pentecost and was prominent in the leadership of the Jerusalem church (cp. Acts 2:14–40; 5:1–11; 10:1 to 11:18; Galatians 2:7–9) though a letter with instructions for the Gentiles was sent in the name of the apostles and not from a ‘head apostle’ (Acts 15:23). The ‘binding and loosing’ spoken of in verse 19 is also shown to be the prerogative of the local church (Matthew 18:15–20; cp. 1 Corinthians 5:4–5). There aren’t any apostolic successors to Peter. His spiritual successors are those who submit to the whole counsel of God as it is taught in the Bible, embracing the doctrine of the apostles.

The words of the Lord Jesus, ‘*I will build my church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it*’ are very encouraging. ‘Hades’ means ‘hell’ in this context as translated in the AV; cp. 11:23. The church is constantly under satanic attack but she will never be destroyed. We are assured of the triumph of the gospel. **Let us be encouraged and persevere in our work for the Lord. He is building his church!**

Let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me

We are not told why Jesus commanded the disciples that they should not reveal his identity as the Messiah (20). From that time, he began to teach them that he must go to Jerusalem where he would suffer at the hands of the Jewish leadership, be killed and raised the third day (21). Peter had confessed that Jesus is *'the Christ, the Son of the living God'* (16) but he could not accept that the Lord Jesus had to suffer and to die. He rebuked Jesus for saying these things, but the Saviour sharply rebuked him with the words, *'Get behind me, Satan! You are an offence to me'* (23). Peter wanted to turn Jesus away from his mission of suffering and death, but such thoughts came from the devil. If a person is to know God, he must be sure of two things: who Jesus is, and why he came to this earth (ie. the Person and the Work of Christ).

Jesus said, *'If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'* (24). Discipleship is costly but the alternative to following Christ is too dreadful to contemplate. Jesus said, *'For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?'* (26). To prefer the world and its passing pleasures to Christ is the height of folly. To lose one's soul is to suffer eternal loss. **Have you taken up your cross to follow Christ? Are you denying yourself to please him?**

Jesus spoke of his coming again in great glory and he then promised that some of those present would not die until they had seen him coming in his kingdom (27–28). The second reference to his coming cannot mean his return at the end of the world. No one will *'taste death'* in a physical sense after that coming when Christians will be caught up to heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Jesus said that they *will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power* (Mark 9:1). This probably refers to his resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and the tremendous impact of the gospel upon the Roman world which the apostles were accused of turning upside down (Acts 17:6).

For the kingdom of heaven's sake

The Lord Jesus had so solemnly stressed the commitment involved in marriage that the disciples wondered if it were better for a person to remain single (9–10). Jesus pointed out that some do not marry because they are born eunuchs (they have some defect at birth) or have been physically castrated and made eunuchs. There are others, however, who choose the single state *for the kingdom of heaven's sake* (11–12). These verses do not sanction the compulsory celibacy of those who serve as ministers in the church or for pressure to be put on young people to take vows of celibacy. Scripture warns us against such teaching (1 Timothy 4:3). If a person chooses to remain single, it is their personal choice and should never come from group pressure. Whether single or married, we should always seek to glorify God in our lives.

The Lord Jesus always had time for children, but the disciples would have sent them away (13–15). **We must never despise children or the work among the young. Most Christians come to Christ in their youth and we must always be aware of the children in our church.** God has given us our children and those of us who are parents have the great privilege and solemn duty to train them by teaching them the Word of God. We are to show them how Scripture is applied to everyday life in the home, and teach them how to pray. We are to be a godly example to them.

Jesus said, *'Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven'* (14). Gospel work among children in Sunday School and similar mid-week activities is most important as we are receiving children in Christ's name (18:5). Most children (from non-Christian families) are ignorant of Bible teaching and do not know the message of the gospel. If you are serving Christ in teaching children his Word, persevere. There is great joy, blessing and reward in such work. Children need to be saved from their sins and we rejoice when they are saved.

What God has joined together

There were conflicting views among the Jews concerning marriage and divorce in New Testament times. There were two opposing schools of thought among the scribes and Pharisees in understanding Deuteronomy 24:1. Some believed that the verse taught that divorce was only permissible when there was adultery. The others twisted the Scripture by taking part of the verse, ‘*she finds no favour in his eyes*’ to give a man the most flimsy excuse to divorce his wife (eg. if she served him food that was over-cooked). The Pharisees wanted to trap the Lord Jesus into taking sides (3).

Jesus took his hearers back to the institution of marriage (Genesis 2:24). He said, ‘*What God has joined together, let not man separate*’ (6). God means marriage to be permanent. Jesus said that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of men’s hearts (8). This provision was to protect a wife who could be left destitute by divorce, with no means of support. The certificate did mean that she was free to remarry (Deuteronomy 24:1–4). It was also intended to make people think very seriously before embarking upon divorce.

Divorce often involves much heartache and distress and human sinfulness has blighted many a marriage. If marriage were seen to be a divine institution, people would not rush in and out of it. The worldly, easy-going attitude to marriage and divorce has infiltrated many evangelical churches. We must take to heart the words of Ephesians 5:22 to 33. **Christians must recognise that their spouse is not perfect and that it takes much hard work, patience and self-giving love to make a happy marriage.**

Christians who have been deserted by their spouse and have suffered the trauma of marriage break-up should know the love and understanding of their local church. Divorce and remarriage is a controversial subject and godly men differ. I believe that those who have been deserted by their spouse are free to remarry.

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him!

Six days after Jesus had spoken to his disciples of the need for self-denial and personal cross-bearing, he took Peter, James and John up to a high mountain where he was transfigured before them. They saw him speaking with Moses and Elijah. Moses represents the Law, and Elijah the Prophets. The Lord Jesus has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets through his life and death (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46).

Moses had seen the majesty of God on Mount Sinai and later, his face shone, reflecting the glory of God (Exodus 24:9–10; 34:29–35). The Lord Jesus did not merely reflect the glory of God; he is God! The brilliance and the majesty seen by the three disciples was that of God himself. A bright cloud overshadowed the Lord Jesus and the disciples. The voice of God was heard coming from the cloud, ‘*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him!*’ (5). The three disciples were filled with fear and fell on their faces. Jesus touched them, telling them to get up and not be afraid (6–7). Think about the words, ‘*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him!*’ **The Lord Jesus still speaks to us and encourages us through his precious Word. Are you listening?**

Master, speak! Thy servant heareth.

Waiting for thy gracious word,

Longing for thy voice that cheereth;

Master, let it now be heard.

I am listening, Lord, for thee;

What hast thou to say to me? (Frances R. Havergal)

As they came down the mountain, Jesus told the three disciples not to tell anyone about the vision until he had risen from the dead (9). He told them that just as John the Baptist (who came ‘*in the spirit and power of Elijah*’; Luke 1:17) suffered, so he too would suffer (12–13). The transfiguration of Jesus had a lasting impression upon the three men. John wrote, ‘*We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father*’ (John 1:14). Peter records, ‘*We ... were eye-witnesses of his majesty*’ (2 Peter 1:16–17).

When Jesus came down from the mountain with Peter, James and John, he found the other disciples surrounded by a crowd. They were disputing with the scribes after failing to cast out a demon from a boy (Mark 9:14). This failure must have brought much scorn from the enemies of Jesus. The distraught father of the boy pleaded with Jesus to deliver his son from the demon which threw him into terrible convulsions, often endangering his life (14–16).

Jesus rebuked those around him as a *'faithless and perverse generation'* (17). The disciples were lacking in faith and the perverse scribes were no doubt gloating at their failure to exorcise the demon. Jesus graciously answered the man's prayer and the boy was delivered from the demon that had so tormented him. The disciples had cast out devils on other occasions (Mark 6:7–13) and they were concerned at their failure to help the boy. Jesus told them that it was because of their lack of faith (20–21). We cannot live on past successes and it is so easy to fail because of unbelief and fear.

Jesus promised, *'If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you'* (20). A mustard seed is very small and yet grows into a tree which is large enough to shelter birds (13:31–32). *'Faith as a mustard seed'* is a trust in God which does not give way to despair when prayer is not immediately answered; it perseveres in prayer; it expects great things from God and attempts great things for God. **Is your faith very small, just like a mustard seed? Do not be discouraged; exercise that small faith and discover what God is able to do.**

*Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the child-like praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again.
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
And all my simple faith devour.* (Charles Wesley)

How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?

We have seen that we must seek the repentance of a believer who has sinned against us (15) and this prompted Peter to ask, *'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?'* (21). The answer of Jesus and the parable that follows show that every Christian must be merciful and have a forgiving spirit. The cruel behaviour of the man who had been forgiven the massive debt which he had no hope of repaying, rightly fills us with indignation. He had owed a huge fortune, but his fellow servant owed him just a hundred denarii (the equivalent of a hundred day's wages). The message of this parable is that God has graciously forgiven the Christian. We could never have saved ourselves. **How dare we refuse to forgive anyone who has sinned against us when they have sought our forgiveness?** How dare we be so eaten up by anger, like the man in the parable, who refused to forgive? We must have a forgiving spirit!

There is much woolly-minded thinking concerning forgiveness. If those who have sinned against us refuse to repent, we are not expected to forgive them, as verses 15 to 17 demonstrate (cp. Luke 17:3–4). God only forgives those who repent of their sins and any forgiveness which does not lead to reconciliation falls short of the biblical ideal. We must, however, pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:43–45; cp. Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60) and be prepared to forgive them! Are you refusing to forgive someone who has sinned against you and has repented of that sin? Forgiveness must be whole-hearted (35). If your attitude is, 'I'll forgive but I will never forget', you have not really forgiven or been reconciled. You are still harbouring a bitter and a resentful spirit which will blight your Christian life if you do not deal with it.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.
(Ephesians 4:32)

If your brother sins against you

The rest of this chapter deals with church discipline and forgiveness. What must you do *if your brother sins against you* (15)? – You must speak to him privately about what he has done to you, and seek to win him over by his repentance and reconciliation to you. If he refuses to listen to you, you must then take with you one or two witnesses to hear your complaint against him (cp. Deuteronomy 19:15). If he still refuses to listen, the matter must be taken to the church (the local church is meant here), the witnesses confirming your complaint. If he refuses to listen to the church and fails to repent, he must be excommunicated from the church and thus be considered as someone who is not a Christian. We need to exercise great wisdom in such cases. Eternal issues are at stake, but the Lord will give us wisdom and everything else that we need at such a time (19). See 1 Corinthians 5:1–7 for an example of church discipline of a church member).

Church discipline is essential for the sake of the sinning believer and for the church itself. It must always be exercised in love and with an intense desire for the restoration of the offender. There can be no forgiveness for him until he repents of his sin. Forgiveness brings reconciliation between the aggrieved parties and the restoration of fellowship. Is there someone in the church with whom you are not talking because they have offended you? The Lord has not said that you must wait for them to make the first move. Go and seek them out and get matters put right between yourselves. You may have misunderstood them and no sin is involved at all. If you do not follow these instructions, you are disobeying God's Word. I recognise, however, that if the church leadership is sinning, the situation is far more complex and difficult to resolve, as they control the church meetings.

Verse 20 is well known and often quoted, but remember that it is given in the context of church discipline. It is of course true that the Lord Jesus is among us in our gatherings for worship and prayer. Let us always remember this as we meet to worship him. What a privilege we have!

Lest we offend them

The Lord Jesus again told his disciples that he would be betrayed, killed and that he would rise on the third day. They just could not take it all in and were *exceedingly sorrowful* (22–23; cp. 16:21).

When Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, Peter was asked by collectors of the temple tax, '*Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?*' (24). This tax was the ransom price of a half-shekel paid by every male Jew of twenty years and over for the maintenance of the sanctuary (Exodus 30:12–14; 38:26). Peter answered, '*Yes*' to their question but he must have been amazed to find Jesus opening a conversation on this subject as soon as he entered the house (25).

Jesus asked Peter for his opinion and went on to show that just earthly kings did not impose taxes on their sons, he was also exempt from paying the double-drachma (half-shekel) temple tax (26). He is the Lord who is greater than the temple, which is his Father's house (12:6; cp. John 2:16).

Jesus told Peter that the tax should be paid however, '*Lest we offend them*' (27). Jesus told Peter to cast a line and hook into the sea. The first fish to be caught would have in its mouth '*a piece of money*' (the Greek word for this expression is '*statēr*' which was a coin sufficient to pay exactly the temple tax for two). This miracle and his knowledge of the incident in which Peter was questioned about the temple tax, again demonstrates that Jesus is the almighty Son of God.

The Lord Jesus was careful not to give offence by asserting his rights over a trivial matter. **The message of the gospel offends many but we must be careful not to give offence by our attitude and behaviour towards those who are not believers (cp. Acts 24:16; 2 Corinthians 6:3).**

Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

The question of the disciples, ‘*Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*’ came after they had been quarrelling about this very subject (1; Mark 9:33–34). Jesus called a little child to himself and told the disciples that there can be no entrance into the kingdom of heaven without conversion. He drove home his answer to them by emphasising that true greatness lies in childlike trust and humility (4).

*Make me, O Lord, a child again,
So tender, frail, and small,
In self possessing nothing, and
In thee possessing all.* (William Hendriksen – translated from a Dutch poem, ‘Te worden als een kindeke’).

The Lord Jesus went on to give some solemn warnings:

- ‘*Woe to the world because of offences!*’ (‘*temptation to sin*’ – ESV). Those who would seek to entice a Christian (‘*one of these little ones who believe in me*’) into sin or cause them to sin, will face a dreadful judgment (6–7).
- We must also give up anything that stands between us and the salvation of our souls. Things that are as dear to us as our hands, feet, or eyes must be given up if they cause us to sin. Verses 8 and 9 do not mean that we must literally cut off hands, etc., but that we are to put fleshly passions to death (Galatians 5:19–21,24). **Better the pain of putting sin in our lives to death now, than to suffer the eternal pains of hell!**

The Greek word used here for ‘*hell fire*’ (9) is ‘Gehenna’. This was also the name of a valley to the south of Jerusalem which became known as ‘the place of fire’ because during the reigns of the wicked kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, children were roasted to death as sacrifices to the god Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10). ‘Gehenna’ became the word used to describe hell where the fire is eternal (cp. Revelation 14:11; 20:10,15). The truth about hell should cause us to be urgent in making the gospel known to sinners (2 Corinthians 5:11).

Their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven

The Lord Jesus warns, ‘*Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones*’ (10). ‘*These little ones*’ are believers (6). We must not despise any of God’s children. The sin of pride may cause us to despise another believer because he does not come from our social class or race, or possess our intellectual ability. Let us take this warning of Jesus to heart! It is no light matter to despise those who have angels as their friends. Do we have guardian angels? Jesus said, ‘*In heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven*’ (10). Scripture does not teach that every believer has a single guardian angel but angels do watch over us and minister to us (Psalm 91:11–12; Isaiah 37:36; Acts 5:19; Hebrews 1:14).

Christian, you are so precious to God that he uses his mighty, sinless angels to protect you: *The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear him, and delivers them* (Psalm 34:7). We see examples of this truth throughout the Bible. An angel fed and encouraged the prophet Elijah when he fled from wicked Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1–8). Daniel was protected when he was thrown into the den of lions (Daniel 6:19–23). Peter was released from prison by an angel (Acts 12:5–11). There is much talk today of evil spirits and of the powers of darkness, and they are real enough. However, we should think more about the ministry of angels who work silently and invisibly on our behalf.

The parable of the lost sheep illustrates God’s loving concern for his people when they go astray. Jesus said, ‘*It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish*’ (14). This is a great encouragement to the weak, despairing believer and it challenges us to persevere in prayer for the backslider. **Have you been straying from the Lord? The Good Shepherd loves his sheep. Call upon him and ask him to restore your soul (Psalm 23:3).** The Lord will then rejoice over you and he will restore to you the joy of your salvation (Psalm 51:12–13).