

Pure Religion

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1. GOD IS NOT MOCKED

PART ONE

Open your Bibles with me tonight to Paul's letter to the Galatians. We will begin by reading chapter 6 verses 7 and 8: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

There is a relationship with what we have just read to verse 6; however, in addition to several issues of interpretation with that verse that I would have to unravel for you, our purpose this evening is such that it is best to avoid it altogether. Context is always important, of course, but you can take what I say tonight and apply it back to verse 6, and there will be no problem. Also, I am unsure that we will be able to cover verse 10 the next time, but it is also true with this verse that you can take what I say, and apply it there.

So let us turn our attention first to verses 7 and 8. Paul would like to make sure that people do not have a false assumption about their condition, what would happen to them, or how God would treat them. He tells us not to be deceived. Deceived about what? He says that we are not to be deceived about the fact that God cannot be mocked. Then he talks about sowing and reaping, and he tells us that if you sow to the flesh, then from the flesh you will reap destruction. But if you will sow to the Spirit, then from the Spirit, you will reap life everlasting.

This warning, this admonition, suggests a troubling reality in the hearts of men, namely, that there are those who are deceived about these simple truths that seem so obvious to us, at least in our more sober, spiritual moments. What are they deceived about? They are deceived about the things that Paul is now telling us not to be deceived about. In other words, they are deceived into thinking that God *can* be mocked. They are deceived into thinking that they can sow to the flesh and not reap destruction. Maybe some of them even think that they will reap life everlasting, even though they sow to the flesh.

On the other hand, maybe some people are deceived into thinking that they can sow to the Spirit and not reap life. Why do they think this way? And what does the apostle Paul have to say about them? These people are also deceived, and we will briefly talk about them later. First, we will talk about those who think that they can mock God with impunity.

Whenever a person thinks that he can sow to the flesh and not reap destruction, he falls under the kind of deception that Paul here tells us to avoid. Specifically, there are a number of ways that one can succumb to this kind of deception. A person may be self-

deceived, so that he convinces himself to believe something that is untrue. Or, someone else may have a big part in convincing him of the falsehood. Whatever the case may be, a person who is deceived in the way that we are now considering has a false conception of his own spiritual condition. He says to himself, "It is well, it is well with my soul," when it is not true.

A person may be deceived into thinking that the things he's doing are not really sinful. In his own thinking, he may subtly alter the meanings of the words that the Bible uses to describe sin. He may interpret the words that the Bible uses – that is, to distort them – in such a manner, so that it takes much more than what he is doing before he would fit the description of a wicked sinner. Another person might not deny that the things that he is doing are sinful according to biblical terms. But no matter how much of these sinful acts he performs, and no matter how often he performs them, he is convinced that he is still a Christian, and that God will still welcome him into heaven.

Then, there are those who seem to understand what the Bible says about sin, and they do not object to its definition of sin. So they understand that what they're doing are sinful, and that they are living a sinful lifestyle. Moreover, they may not even deny that they are yet unsaved. With some of them, the deception is that they always think that they have more time. But the deception is still greater than this, in that they think that they will actually use this time to eventually turn back to God.

One preacher told a story about a young man he encountered, and it aptly illustrates what we are saying here. I am not quoting him exactly, and so the details may differ somewhat. The young man mentioned that he was going to visit the town where the preacher resided, and so the preacher invited him to attend his church, the one where he was the pastor. But this young man replied, "No, I attend church here at home, and I'm happy with that, but I'm not going to your church." Surprised, the preacher asked, "Why not? What's wrong with my church? Why won't you come?" The man explained, "Well, if I come to your church, I might get saved." At this, of course, the preacher was astonished, and so he pressed on: "What do you mean? I would think that you would want to come so that you *can* get saved." The young man said, "But that's the problem: I don't want to get saved. I don't want to get saved, because there are still a number of things that I would like to do, and if I get saved now, I won't be able to do them anymore."

"No, I don't want to get saved now," he continued, "but this is what I'm going to do: I'm going to keep on doing what I would like to do, and I'm going to enjoy myself and pursue my desires and ambitions. And after a number of years, perhaps at the end of my life, when I have done all that I would like to do, then I will get saved." As one would expect, the preacher became quite indignant, and challenged him, "Why, do you plan to make a fool out of God?" At this, the young man looked at the preacher and said, "Yes. Yes, this is exactly what I am going to do."

We are horrified at this young man's unabashed irreverence, but the truth is that many people are doing the same thing – they're trying to make a fool out of God. They're trying to pursue interests that the Bible forbids. They try to maintain a set of priorities that God

disapproves. They try to indulge in desires that are contrary to the law of God. But they say to themselves, "I still have time. I'm going to get saved later. For now, I'm going to enjoy myself, and then after that I will settle down." In this way, many people try to fool God. They try to cheat him. They may not be as blatant as this young man, but that's because they are not as "honest" – or, really, as stupid and irreverent – as this young man. It is not that this young man is any better, but that both kinds of people are bad and sinful, and both will be condemned to hell.

I have known and ministered to people who are, in principle, no different than this young man. These people were given ample attention, and detailed explanation of the truths of God. I have spent many hours ministering to some of them. I have written them long letters to expound the faith and to answer their questions. I have sent them the only copies of some of my books to educate and mature them in the faith. I have spent many hours on the phone with some of them, dismantling their spiritual bondage, and encouraging them to good works and to live a zealous life.

Some of these people were seemingly established in the faith for a while, but then something happened to them, and from that point forward they drifted back into the world. I say that they "drifted" because each time it was a slow process, and at least with these people that I'm thinking of right now, it was never a violent and total change, although each time there was a definite turning point. What at least partly explains their backsliding was that, each time something would happen to the person that required him to rearrange his life and reassess his priorities. The backsliding would begin at this point when the person decided to put worldly things first instead of continuing to devote their energy to pursue the things of God and seek the kingdom of God.

One of them might have started a new job, and his new job required much more time from him than the previous one. To excel on this job, it required his total commitment, so that he was either going to demonstrate inferior performance, or he was going to have to place other things aside in favor of this new job. Then, another one might have started a new business, and the same thing would happen. Another person might have gotten married, and the same thing would happen. Then, this person became a parent and spiritual things became even less important to him.

Like I said, the turn was never violent, that is, at least with these people that I'm thinking of right now. None of them said, "I'm denouncing the faith. I do not want to be a Christian anymore. So from now on I'm not going to read my Bible. I'm not going to pray. I'm not going to seek God, and I'm not going to consider the welfare of the ministry and the church." None of them said anything like this, but the thinking went something like, "I am new at this job in which I have yet to prove myself. I'm not used to the many needs and demands of this new job, not to mention the unfamiliar people that I now have to deal with. So I'm going to work through this present crisis – I don't think it will take very long – and after that I'm going to have more free time. And then I'll direct my attention and energy back to the things of God and my spiritual well-being. I'll get back to study and prayer, and ministry and the church." But while they waited, they drifted further and further away from the faith, and from the lifestyle that they used to know.

You see, these people were deceived. Jesus said that we are to seek first the kingdom of God, but these people believed that they could put something else first – for a while at least – and then go back and put the kingdom of God first again. Surely God could not ask for more? But they were deceived – God cannot be mocked. God cannot be cheated, and what every man sows that shall he reap. A man who continues to sow to the flesh will from the flesh reap destruction. This is a principle that he can never escape, that he can never run away from. And this is a principle that will never fail. If you continue to sow to the flesh, you *will* reap destruction.

But you say to me, "Don't you believe in the biblical doctrine of predestination? If God has chosen them for salvation, then they will surely be restored and come back to God." Of course I believe this, but by what means will God bring them back? It is by his Word and by his Spirit. It is precisely by a warning and by an admonition such as this one that Paul gives us, made effective by his Spirit, that God will bring back the elect, that God will awaken the elect's spiritual senses.

But in one of his letters, Paul tells us that some people return to the world, because they love the world more than they love God (2 Timothy 4:10), and some people love money more than they love God. Scripture's warnings might not awaken these people, but the word of God will always have some effect on anyone who hears. If it is not a positive and edifying effect, then it will be a negative, hardening, and destructive effect. So when the reprobate hears, "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked. A man reaps what he sows," he will not react in the same way as someone whose heart has been changed and is being worked on by the Holy Spirit.

But he might still feel a challenge, and he might still feel a threat. He might sense the wrath of God hanging right above his head. He might feel a spiritual burden, but he will refuse to yield, because the Holy Spirit has not given him a heart of flesh, and all that he has is a heart of stone. So he will do the only thing that he knows to do, and that is to suppress the truth in unrighteousness, and to quiet and quench his conscience. For this he will receive an even greater damnation, and this is the will of God for the reprobate.

Once I was trying to convince a friend to leave a cult, but he told me that he had invested some money, about \$900, into a strange project initiated and maintained by the cult, and he was reluctant to leave all of that money behind, so that he was unwilling to leave at least until he could get all that money back. I told him that since he was willing to sell his soul for \$900, I would pay him \$1,000 to buy his soul. Although I considered that a lot of money, I told him that if he would agree to the deal, that's how much I would pay him. But the deal would be that if I were to pay him the \$1,000 to buy his soul, then I would own him forever, and he would have to leave the cult and do whatever I say from that point forward. After all, there would be little difference than when he was with the cult, except he would be \$100 better off. He saw the point and left the cult. But later, he drifted away from the faith, and from me as well. Could it be that that incident revealed what was really in his heart, and what was really important to him?

But God cannot be mocked, and a man will reap what he sows. If he continues to sow to his flesh, then from his flesh he will reap destruction. He cannot escape it. He cannot run away from it. He cannot work around it. He cannot cheat it and outsmart it. This is because God cannot be mocked. He knows all things, and he judges all things, and he has determined that whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap. God will see to it that this happens.

You understand that we're not talking about karma. We're not talking about some impersonal law – some law that is established in the universe that anybody can operate or manipulate. Rather, we are talking about a personal God, a personal judge, who has revealed to us his holy demands. And he tells us that anything is a lie that would convince us that we could sow to the flesh and not reap destruction. Any teaching that would tell you that you could sow to the flesh and still reap life is a lie. It is a deception. It is a false doctrine. And any teaching that tells you that you can cheat God, and change his holy law and his holy judgment is deception and blasphemy. It will lead only to eternal perdition.

So do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. You cannot make him a fool. You cannot manipulate him. You cannot make him your clown. Of course, you can always try, but there will be consequences, and you are deceived if you think you can escape them. But if you would know the truth, then know this: God is not mocked, and if you sow to flesh, then you will reap destruction.

PART TWO

Last time I spoke on Galatians chapter 6 verses 7 and 8. There the apostle Paul tells us, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." These verses imply the disturbing reality that there are people who are indeed deceived about this obvious truth. They are deceived into thinking that God can be mocked, and that one can sow to his flesh and not reap destruction.

There is another place in Paul's letters where he uses the phrase, "Do not be deceived," and if for no other reason than to further our understanding on this passage in Galatians, it will be worthwhile for us to take a look at this other passage. I have in mind First Corinthians chapter 6, and when you get there, you can read with me, verses 9 and 10. He writes, "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Here Paul again tells us not to be deceived, and the thing that he does not want us to be deceived about is the fact that "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God." And so we are again faced with the disturbing reality that people can be deceived about something as clear and as obvious as this, so that they would think that the wicked will indeed inherit the kingdom of God. Their thinking about right and wrong, about what pleases God, and about what God requires from them, is the very opposite of what God has revealed.

So lest anyone be confused, and lest anyone be deceived, Paul wishes to make his point clear, and that is the unalterable fact that "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God." Notice that Paul says it twice. He says it once in verse 9, and then after giving us a list of specific types of sinners, he says it again at the end of verse 10. He says again, "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God." He is saying, "Do not be deceived. Make no mistake about this. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. And don't you dare think differently. The wicked it will never, never, never inherit the kingdom of God. God will not welcome them into heaven, but he will send them to hell to be punished and tortured forever."

And notice that here he does not give us only a list of sins, but he gives us a list of the *people* identified by the sins. Our society often separates the people from their actions, and if they condemn wickedness at all, they tend to condemn the actions, but excuse the people, perhaps as victims of their upbringing and circumstances. This twisted way of thinking has infiltrated the church and its theology, so that many believers even think that "God hates the sin, but he loves the sinner" is part of the gospel.

In one biblical dictionary, one scholar pointed out that the Hebrews did not separate the people from their actions, but from this premise, he immediately concluded that *therefore* God hates the sin but loves the sinner. I can't tell you exactly what was happening in his mind when he wrote this, but this conclusion is the very opposite of what the premise produces. You see, the premise came from his studies, but his conclusion came from his ingrained assumption that God cannot hate anyone in any sense. This assumption, of course, came from the world, and is now taught through the church. It was so much a part of this biblical scholar, that although his premise logically demanded the opposite, he blindly assumed that it led to his conclusion.

And this is how many people read the Bible today, they assume that their current beliefs are true and right, so that they think whatever they read from the Bible will lend support to them, even if the Bible teaches exactly the opposite of what they believe, and even if it condemns their beliefs and actions as wicked. Christians also often think this way because they have been influenced by the world. They have remaining sin in their hearts, and their minds are not yet completely renewed by the word of God. So, whether we are examining ourselves or helping somebody else, we must use the word of God to break through this spiritual blindness. This deception is real, potent, and stubborn. And so Paul emphasizes to us twice, that the wicked cannot inherit the kingdom of God. In all your thinking about God, sin, and salvation, don't get this wrong, and don't compromise this point.

If the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God, then who are these wicked people? Is someone wicked because he eats meat? Is someone wicked because he believes in capital punishment? Is someone wicked because he disciplines his children? Is someone wicked because he preaches the gospel, and "imposes" his beliefs on other people? Well, this seems to be what many unbelievers think today. And because the church has been weak in resisting their influence, even many professing believers seem to think so as well.

But Paul tells us who these wicked people are. They are fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, and homosexuals. They are the greedy, they are thieves, they are crooks, and they are drunks. In other words, the wicked people are what the unbelievers consider as *normal* people. The wicked people are the non-Christian people, and those whom non-Christians approve or even glorify.

Do not be deceived. These people will not inherit the kingdom of God. They will not enter heaven. If you are a fornicator, you will go to hell. If you are an idolater, you will go to hell. If you are an adulterer, you will go to hell. If you are a homosexual, you will go to hell. And if you are a fornicator, or an idolater, or an adulterer, or if you're a homosexual, don't think that you will enter heaven that way – that is, without repentance and faith – because you will not enter. You are one of the wicked people that God will send straight to hell when you die.

And the same goes with those of you who are greedy, those of you who are thieves, those of you who are crooks, and those of you who are drunks. Don't think that you can enter heaven that way. You may hope, and you may assume, but God is telling you that you

will not enter heaven as an adulterer or a homosexual, and he is telling you that you will not enter heaven as a thief or a drunk. If you think otherwise, then you have been deceived, and you must stop taking comfort in your delusion, but wake up to the truth instead.

It is true that Paul is addressing the church. In verse 8, he says, "Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers." So what Paul says to the Corinthians ought to serve as a severe warning to them. As he says to them in another place, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

There is one school of thought that maintains that God has one set of requirements for his people, and another set of requirements for those who do not know him. In other words, according to this way of thinking, something like the Ten Commandments were given to the people of God, and so they reason that God never said that the Gentiles could not fornicate and commit adultery, or worship idols. Even some professing Christians believe this and think that God's moral laws have been given to believers only, because they have been saved by grace, and because they have received revelation from God. Certainly, they think, the same set of requirements cannot apply to others.

As a matter of fact, this is just not true. Even in the Old Testament, the prophets hold the Gentiles accountable for breaking God's moral laws, including such things as idolatry and adultery. And Paul says in the first and second chapters of his letter to the Romans that the Gentiles had the law of God written on their hearts. So the same moral requirements have been imposed upon both believers and unbelievers. Fornication, adultery, idolatry, homosexuality, thievery, greed, and all things that the Bible calls sins, are sins for both believers and unbelievers.

We do not have time to make a detailed digression on this issue, but what Peter wrote ought to settle it: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, 'If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'" (1 Peter 4:17-18). So unbelievers are not exempt from God's moral laws, nor are they exempt from believing the gospel, but because, according to God's sovereign and active reprobation, they break God's moral laws and reject his gospel, their damnation is sure.

But of course, Paul is not saying that only Christians must not be adulterers and homosexuals, for his point is precisely that these people cannot be saved and that these people are wicked, and that these people are unbelievers. He says to the Corinthians, "Why are you acting like the unbelievers? Don't you know that the wicked will not enter heaven? Don't be unclear about this. Don't be deceived about this. Wicked people like fornicators, adulterers, idolaters, and homosexuals will never inherit the kingdom of heaven."

Then, he continues in verse 11, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." He says, "some of you *were* these people." Of course, he says "some" because although all were sinners, he has not given a complete list of sins or sinners. The point is that the wicked cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven, and some of these Corinthians were these wicked people that Paul listed. But they were changed. He says, "But you are washed, you were sanctified, you were justified."

In the Greek, the word "but" appears before each verb, and the same is true with the word "you." The New International Version and the English Standard Version have the word "you" before each verb, but they do not repeat the word "but" before each verb. The more literal translations on this verse are the King James Version, the New King James Version, and the New American Standard Bible. So the proper translation should be, "But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified." By repeating the words "but" and "you" before each verb, Paul emphasizes the difference between Christians and non-Christians, the difference between the righteous and the wicked, and the difference between the saved and the unsaved: "The wicked are that way, and they will not enter heaven. But you are this way – God has made you this way – and you will enter heaven." To blur or to deny this distinction is to be deceived.

So there is hope for the wicked, since these Corinthians that Paul is writing to were once such wicked people, but God changed them by his grace. So there's hope for the wicked, but they cannot enter heaven as they are. The deception that Paul is talking about is to be confused on this point. If you're one of these wicked people, there is hope, there is a way out. These sins can be forgiven – *you* can be forgiven. But that is it, isn't it? To receive forgiveness, you can no longer justify your sins, and you can no longer ignore the fact that you're a sinner. You need forgiveness, and it is found only in Jesus Christ.

Our passage mentions homosexuals, and since this is a much debated topic in our day, I would like to quickly say something about it, and to use it as an example, as we think about the other kinds of sinners that this passage mentions. We do not have a lot of time left, so I cannot be exhaustive about this.

There are a number of arguments by which homosexuals seek to justify themselves. They say, "We love each other." But what is the definition of love? If we define love as the Bible does, as obedience to the moral law of God in our relationship with God and with one another, then the homosexuals do not love one another. In fact, the Bible says that they lust after one another and use one another. They say, "We are not hurting anyone." But what is the definition of hurt? And why is right and wrong judged by whether an action hurts another person? They call their behavior an "alternative lifestyle," and indeed it is, for it is an alternative to decency and righteousness.

They say that they are born homosexuals, so that they really have no choice in what they become. And if they have no choice about it, then it could not possibly be wrong – at least one can never say that it is their fault. But this assumes a necessary relationship between freedom and responsibility, and as I have repeatedly refuted this assumption,

showing that it is both unjustified and unnecessary, I would not say anything more about this right now.

But there is something related to this that I would like to mention, and that is the way that many Christians have tried to handle this argument. Because the homosexuals have tried to use scientific arguments to prove that sexual orientation is determined by birth and not by choice, many Christians have tried to deal with them on that level, so that they have tried to use scientific arguments against the belief that homosexuals are born homosexuals. For example, one battle may be fought over what DNA research can tell us about this.

As in many similar cases in debate, I say that the whole battle is pointless. Rather, I can answer the homosexuals with a plain, "So what?" *So what* if a person is a homosexual by birth and not by choice? What difference does it make? The question is whether homosexuality is a sin and not what makes a person a homosexual. If a person is a homosexual by birth, then all this means is that God made this person into this particular type of sinner by birth. But this does nothing to change the fact that homosexuality is a sin.

It is indeed possible for homosexuals to change, but this has nothing to do with whether homosexuality is genetically determined. That point is completely irrelevant. Paul says that the wicked people who will not inherit the kingdom include homosexuals, and then he reminds the Corinthians that some of them were homosexuals, so that they were among those people who could not inherit the kingdom of God. But then he adds that they have been washed, that they have been sanctified, and that they have been justified.

Given the assumption that people's theories about genetics is correct in the first place – an assumption that has no rational justification – it does not matter whether a person is a homosexual by birth. Even if homosexuality is genetic, it makes no difference to God – he can still change the person. Therefore, even if I yield the entire scientific aspect of the debate to the homosexuals, I can still say to them, "So what?"

The homosexuals, of course, go much further than trying to justify themselves, and saying that they're not doing anything wrong. They go on to portray themselves as victims, and then as heroes, and as reformers, as pioneers against discrimination and injustice. Some would even claim that God is on their side all the way, and that he is even behind them and supporting their cause. They have convinced themselves that lust is love, that depravity is decency, and that rebellion is reformation.

The sodomites said concerning Lot, "now he wants to play the judge!" (Genesis 19:9), and this is another argument that the homosexuals use against us. They say, "Who are you to judge us?" Well, I know full well who I am, who we are, and also who they are. I am an ambassador of Christ, sent to preach and to enforce his word with spiritual authority. We are the people of God, and the apple of his eye. And as Paul says, we are even to judge angels, and it would seem that "even men of little account in the church" (1 Corinthians 6:4) should be competent enough to judge a matter as obvious as

homosexuality. As for them, we also know who they are – they are the wicked people that Paul says will never inherit the kingdom of heaven, that is, unless they repent and change.

Of course we must not give the false impression that we are teaching salvation by works or by personal holiness. And certainly salvation does not come by just *not* being a homosexual, but the problem is whether homosexuals admit that they are sinners and that they need Christ at all. The fatal spiritual problem is that they do not admit their sin and their need. Instead, many of them are hardened, and even boast against the command of God, saying that, "We have done no wrong. God is on our side." They say, "Peace, Peace. God will not judge us. We are in the right, and they are in the wrong. We are the victims, and then we are the heroes, and we are reformers. As for these people who oppose us, they are full of hate and prejudice." As long as the homosexuals think this way, they will remain far from the kingdom of heaven.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul mentions those who are given over to shameful lusts. He says, "Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (v. 26-27). And then, he says in verse 32, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them."

It is for this reason that God's wrath is poured out upon them. Today there are many, including some who call themselves Christians, who might not be homosexuals themselves, but they have taken up the cause to promote acceptance of homosexuality in the church and in society. Some of them might not be homosexuals themselves, but they approve and encourage those who are homosexuals. These people will share in the condemnation that God will pour out upon the homosexuals. What would God do with a person who votes to keep a homosexual pastor or to ordain a homosexual?

Sometimes people rightly point out that the Bible condemns all kinds of sins, and not only homosexuality. This objection has been repeated so often, and the church has answered it so weakly, that it has been at times effective in neutralizing the church's condemnation against this abomination. When we are talking about homosexuality, we should insist that it is a sin that will keep a person out of the kingdom of God; in other words, it will send him to hell. Rather than weakening our outrage against this particular sin because of the objection that the Bible mentions many other sins, we should increase our outrage and then broaden it to include all sins.

The truth is that all sins lead to hell, and that *any* sin would keep a person out of the kingdom of God. If not for the sovereign grace of God, all of us would be excluded from the kingdom of heaven. So let us remind ourselves of the passage from Galatians once again. There, Paul says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what

he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

What is your excuse for putting off spiritual things? What is your excuse for putting off repentance? Hurry, and seek him while he may be found. Some people say to themselves, "He will wait for me. He will be there when I'm ready." Yes, but maybe you won't be there. Maybe you will never be ready. The "prodigal son" came back to his father because "he came to his senses" (Luke 15:17). And Scripture tells us elsewhere that it is the Spirit of God that awakens the elect to his spiritual senses. Some people try to sound clever, and say, "He will forgive me. After all, that's his job." But if we can speak this way about God at all, then it is also his job to condemn people like these. God will not be mocked. You cannot make a fool out of him.

Now we are out of time. But before we conclude I would like to mention another kind of deception that we can find in our passage from Galatians chapter 6. Paul says, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction." But you see, Paul does not stop there, for he continues to say, "the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

In our struggle for personal holiness and in our fight of faith, there is sometimes the temptation to become discouraged, or to think that we will not reap God's blessings. But just as the sinner is deceived into thinking that he will not reap destruction, this temptation to discouragement is based on a deception.

So the apostle exhorts us in verse 9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Today we are not deceived. We are sure that God is not mocked. We are sure that a man will reap what he sows. We are sure that a man who sows to his flesh, from his flesh, he will reap destruction. And we are not deceived, because we know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. We know and we are sure that fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, and homosexuals, as well as thieves, liars, and slanderers, will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.

So now do not be deceived, for the same principle works in a positive direction as well. If we would not grow tired, if we would not grow complacent, if we would not become discouraged, and if we will continue to do good, and do what God has commanded us to do, then we will surely reap a harvest of life and glory at the proper time. The writer of Hebrews says that "anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (11:6). Such is the nature of true faith, the kind of faith that will sow to the Spirit and reap life everlasting.

2. PURE RELIGION

PART TWO

We will begin by reading from James 1:22-24. The apostle writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."

Spiritual self-deception is a most remarkable thing. It is both intriguing and infuriating when you have to deal with someone who is self-deceived about his spiritual condition. At one time or another, all of us have deceived ourselves about our own spiritual condition, but it is a most remarkable thing when you are witnessing it in someone else. It is as if that person cannot see the most obvious thing in the world.

Here James calls anyone self-deceived who only listens to the word, but does not do what it says. To illustrate this, he paints the picture of a person who looks at himself in a mirror, but when he turns away, he immediately forgets what he has seen about himself in the mirror. Of course, this person still retains an opinion about himself, about his appearance, but it might not resemble anything like what the mirror tells him.

What an appropriate picture this is of one who is self-deceived about his own spiritual condition. If you have performed any ministry or if you have done any counseling at all, you have probably already faced a number of people like this. But if you have never encountered someone like this, there is no need to learn by experience, as if your observation can tell you about people's hearts in the first place. Let the word of God tell you about it.

In my years of ministry, I have spoken to quite a few people who came under tremendous conviction when reading the Bible. Often they would become very troubled and concerned about their spiritual condition. This happens to believers quite often. Christians who are new to the faith or are temporarily in sin might even waver in their assurance of salvation.

This happens, for example, very often after people finished reading the Sermon on the Mount. They would come to me and say, "If this is what Jesus requires, then I am in trouble. If this is what it means to be a believer, then I must not be one." But they did not realize that a person can never fulfill the Sermon on the Mount by his own power, and this is true even after a person has become a Christian. Only God can regenerate a sinner, and radically changes his innermost dispositions by the Spirit. Then, after a person is converted, it is God who empowers him to be holy by the same Spirit. As Paul writes, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).

Sometimes these people were not really converted in the first place, and they needed to seek Christ for salvation. Otherwise, what they needed was a better understanding of the biblical teaching on faith and grace. But you see, in a sense their response was very positive, because they did not distort the Sermon on the Mount in their minds to protect their previous conception about their own spiritual condition. They took it seriously, and they were reading what Jesus intended to convey by it. They looked at the mirror, and they did not like what they saw there. What they needed was a firm grasp on God's way of salvation. Instead of resting their assurance on their own holiness, they must place their trust on God's promise.

Then, here is the remarkable thing, and that is when you see other people read the same Sermon and not be troubled by it at all. In fact, very often they would read it and feel that they have already done all that is required by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and if they are troubled at all, they are troubled by the idea that other people are not doing the same. Here is the self-deception. They can look into the mirror of God's word, and if they see anything about themselves there at all, it is all forgotten by the time they turn around, by the time they walk away.

This kind of deception is often evident when you are trying to give someone doctrinal instructions. You may give them a step-by-step exposition. You can patiently present your case, and provide meticulous answers to all their questions and objections. At the end, they might even say that they understand the biblical teaching, and that they agree with what you have said. But then the next time you see them, the next time you talk to them, they would speak and behave as if nothing has happened. They would talk to you as if they have not changed their position on the matter, and it would be as if the previous conversation never occurred at all.

Once I was speaking to a woman about a particular doctrine. It does not matter what the doctrine was because our focus right now is spiritual deception, spiritual blindness. The woman was having difficulty because she could not reconcile the biblical doctrine with something false that she believed in. But rather than showing that the doctrine was not really taught in the Bible, and rather than to renounce the falsehood that she affirmed, she sighed and said, "Well, I suppose that it is just a mystery."

But it was not a mystery, as if we lacked the necessary information, or as if it was something impossible to understand. If she had only assented to the biblical doctrine and renounced the false belief, then there would have been no longer any difficulty, and there would have been no longer any need to reconcile two incompatible things. So I insisted to her, "No, it is not a mystery. I just got through explaining everything to you, and answered all your objections."

She appeared shocked by this. You see, she had made up her mind that if she believed one thing and the Bible taught the opposite, then the matter must have been a mystery. It never occurred to her that her belief could be false. But she was teachable, and so she

asked me to explain everything again, and I did. By the end of our conversation, she seemed to have finally understood and assented to the doctrine.

However, the next time we spoke, we were right back at where we started, and it was as if the previous conversation never happened. As far as I could tell, she was not deliberately rebelling against what I taught her from the Bible, but this happened without her realizing it. And so when I mentioned the doctrine this time, she again said, "Well, I suppose that all of this is just a mystery." I had to remind her of our previous conversation and how it concluded, and then I explained everything again. You would think that this was the last time, but the next time we spoke, there was the same problem. I had to repeatedly explain the doctrine to her over a period of several months. After that, it seemed that she finally got it.

The same thing can happen when you are giving someone ethical instructions, or when you are attempting to awaken someone out of a backslidden state. You can expound the Scripture to him, and point out his sins. At times he may even come under deep conviction and promise you that he is going to be a different man from that moment forward, and that he is going to change. But the next time you see him, he would cheerfully come up to you and greet you, and speak to you as if the previous conversation had never taken place. And then you find out that he never made the appropriate changes to his life after you talked to him the last time.

If you are in the ministry, you will encounter people like these over and over again, and this is why spiritual strength and inner endurance are essential. You might say that they are necessary for a minister's effectiveness, if not his very sanity. Sometimes these people will push you to the limits of your patience, and you might feel exasperated, and say with Jesus, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Matthew 17:17), and "Are you so dull?" (Matthew 15:16). And you will identify with the writer of Hebrews: "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hebrews 5:11-12).

Spiritual dullness and deception are especially difficult to unravel when you are trying to bring someone out of a cult, that is, when you are trying to "deprogram" a person who has been subjected to prolonged brainwashing. Similar difficulties are often present in varying degrees when you try to bring about a thoroughgoing paradigm shift in the person's theology and intellectual perspective, as when you would try to "convert" someone from Arminianism, Catholicism, dispensationalism, empiricism, among others, to the biblical way of thinking.

These projects require intense and excruciating labor on your part, and may take months, and in some cases, years to complete. Even then, no permanent changes will result, unless they have been brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit, according to his sovereign will. An appropriate way to illustrate this procedure is to liken it to surgery. Just as physical surgery cannot succeed without Providence sustaining the surgeon's work and

the body's functions, spiritual surgery is complicated, and involves intense labor and concentration, but the desired results will not come about without the power of God directly working on the person's heart through your efforts.

In principle, all of these people could be helped without individual attention and counseling, which is very labor-intensive, and in *most* cases really unnecessary. Rather, the best way to help most people is by having them sit under a prolonged period of biblical preaching. The Spirit can apply the word of God to their hearts and effect the necessary and appropriate changes. This is why the ministry of preaching, or the ministry of the word in general, is the most important and powerful work that a minister must perform. Everything else is secondary. Now, I say that these people can be helped by the preached word of God "in principle," because whether they are actually changed by the preaching depends on the will of God for them at that time, and whether they are numbered among the elect or the non-elect.

This kind of spiritual dullness and deception should not surprise us, and it is not as if any of us is completely innocent of it. However, it is indeed a problem and will prevent any significant spiritual progress in a person. It needs to be confronted and dealt with. And here is where we can assist one another, since to be self-deceived is precisely to mean that we might not recognize our own failures and weaknesses, our sins and transgressions. God must enlighten us, and bring these things to our attention. He would often use human instruments, but we must always remember that the instruments themselves have no power to awaken the soul. Spiritual progress is all of God and of grace. So others can speak the truth to us, and confront us, sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully. But since only the Spirit of God has direct access and control to our hearts, it is just as important for us to pray that God will search out hearts and revealed to us our faults.

On the other hand, there is another type of man (or, by God's grace, the same man at a different time!). This is the type of man that is not spiritually deceived. He does not entertain false ideas about his own spiritual condition, but he listens to the word of God, and then responds to it. Verse 25 says, "But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does." He responds differently to the word of God than the one who is self-deceived.

Notice what he does. First, he "looks intently." He does not just stare at the pages of the Bible, and he does not just sit himself down under the sound of the preaching of the word of God. He looks intently, and he pays attention to the word of God, to what is actually being said. Second, and after paying attention to the word of God, he does not look away, he does not walk away, but he stays there. The verse says that he "continues to do this," or that he continues to look intently at the word of God.

Third, unlike the person who deceives himself about his spiritual condition, this man is "not forgetting what he has heard." He retains the truth and turns it over in his mind. And fourth, in addition to this, and also unlike the one who deceives himself, this man is

"doing it" – he is doing what the word of God teaches him. The result is that "he will be blessed in what he does." The person who attains spiritual results, and who attains spiritual growth and progress, is the one who pays attention to the word of God, who listens to it intently, who stays with it, and who changes his thoughts and actions according to the teachings of Scripture.

This demands a change and improvement in the way that we approach Scripture, and in the way that we listen to sermons from our ministers. It is not enough to just be "there" when the Bible is opened, or when someone is preaching. You must be awakened to the real danger and possibility of self-deception in your soul. There are some things that you are thinking and there are some things that you are doing that are so much a part of you, that they will remain untouched even if you repeatedly come across scriptural teachings that speak against them. You must deliberately search them out.

So awake to the danger and possibility of spiritual self-deception, and deliberately pay special attention to the word of God, even regarding those portions and even when it comes to the teachings with which you think you are familiar. Never walk away assuming that you are already doing what the Scripture commands you to do, or that you are already refraining from what the Scripture forbids you to do.

Perhaps if we will all look intently at the word of God, and examine ourselves in its light, we will all realize how much we have deceived ourselves about our own spiritual condition. May God search our hearts. May God enlighten us, save us from deception, and transform us by his grace.

PART TWO

Let us quickly review what we talked about last time. We learned from James the picture of a person who is deceived about his spiritual condition, and James even indicates that he deceives himself. He deceives himself when he only listens to the word of God but then does not do what it says. He puts his face before an open Bible. He sits there when someone is preaching, but he pays no attention. He may even get a glimpse of himself – that is, of his true spiritual condition. But by the time he turns away, he has already forgotten the insight that he has received.

On the other hand, the person who is not deceived treats the word of God differently. He approaches the word of God with reverence and he "looks intently." He pays attention to what he is reading and to what he is listening, and he does not look away. He does not walk away thinking that he has learned everything that he needs to know. Instead, he continues at it. He keeps at it, and he continues looking at the word of God. He continues receiving insight from the word of God about his spiritual condition, and James says that he does not forget about what he sees there. Rather, he pays attention, and he continues to look intently. And then rather than stopping there as the self-deceived person does, does what the word of God teaches. He obeys, he performs what he has been taught by the Bible.

That is the difference between a person who is deceived about his spiritual condition, and a person who acknowledges what the word of God teaches, who is not deceived about his spiritual condition. The second one is the one who pleases God and who makes progress in his spiritual walk with God. While the other man remains in bondage, the one who hears and obeys looks intently into the perfect law of freedom, which sets them free from the bondage of sin and deception.

Now we will proceed to the next passage. We read from verses 26 and 27: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Remember that James is concerned about deception. He is concerned that a person should know his true spiritual condition. He has pointed out that a person may have an opinion about his own condition, when this opinion is a mere delusion – it is a falsehood. Here he mentions it again in verse 26. He says that it is possible for a man to deceive himself as to whether he is truly religious, as to whether he is truly spiritual. It is possible, he says, for a man to deceive himself so that whereas he thinks that he is religious and spiritual, in reality his religion is useless. He gives us some examples of what true religion produces, and if these things are absent from a person's life and character, then he is not truly religious – that is, he is not really devoted to the religion of Christ, and whatever he has is vain and false.

First, he says that a truly religious man will "keep a tight rein on his tongue." Depending on your background – depending on what kind of biblical teaching you have received, and what kind of teaching that the church that you have been attending emphasizes – this item may seem strange to you. The next two items also require exposition, but I think that this one has been neglected, and that is the teaching that true religion is demonstrated in a very large part by what you say, and what you refrain from saying.

The Bible condemns gossip, lying, slander, blasphemy, and also foolish jesting. Who among us are innocent of all these things? But we cannot lower the standard of Scripture. What we need is grace from God and the faith to trust him for salvation. As Jesus says, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). What we say, what we refrain from saying, and how we use our faculty of speech reveal the things that are in our hearts.

If we are wicked and divisive, and if we are busybodies, then we would tend to gossip. If we are foolish and irreverent at heart, then we would lack a gravity and a seriousness in our speech. And those who blaspheme and make unholy talk reveal their hatred of God in their hearts. With those who fear God, there are just some things that they will not say, and there are just some jokes that they will not want to hear and still less repeat. Jesus says, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36).

How about the righteous use of the faculty of speech? Say that you have information that would vindicate the innocent and convict the guilty. You would be doing others a great injustice if you were to refrain from speaking. Or, if you perceive that one of your brothers is in bondage to sin, then it is your duty to speak out according to biblical guidelines. The Bible says, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5). Under some circumstances, if you "love" secretly, then it might just mean that you do not love at all.

Then, of course, one of the most important things for which you must use your gift of speech is to preach the gospel, to hold out the straight and rigid word of life before this crooked generation. The tongue can be very constructive and also very destructive. Later on in the letter, James writes, "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (3:5-6). When the Bible says that something is set on fire by hell, it would be worth our while to pay it serious attention.

Having commented on that, let us return to the central point of our text. Again, James is concerned to show that some people consider themselves religious and spiritual, but they are sorely deceived. Think about how many people who consider themselves religious, spiritual, and knowledgeable about theological matters who nevertheless constantly commit sins of the tongue. Let us take seriously, then, what the Bible says about the sins of the tongue. We can start with an earlier counsel in verse 19: "Everyone should be quick to listen, *slow to speak* and slow to become angry."

We are discussing what makes a truly religious man, and by "religious," of course, we mean to have the kind of faith and life that the Bible teaches. Right now we are not using the word in a negative sense. A truly religious man, or a man who practices a pure religion, a religion that is faultless before God the Father, is one who listens to the word of God and then does what it says. But the one who falsely thinks that he is religious is one who merely listens to the word, but does not do what it says.

You see, many Christians think that a religious man, a spiritual man, is one who prays all the time, who studies all the time, who meditates in the word all the time, who is uninhibited in worship, and who possess boldness to preach the gospel. These are indeed some very good indications of a spiritual man, and a truly religious man would possess these qualities. But what does he do when he comes across an orphan in need? And how does he react to a struggling widow? Our faith, if genuine, ought to produce good works and reflect the compassion of Christ.

The Corinthians were endowed with various spiritual gifts, and because of this they thought they were spiritual. There are many who think the same way today, and you do not have to be a charismatic to be one of them. You may be gifted in theological understanding. You may be gifted in preaching. You may be gifted in administration. You may be gifted in finances. But if, like the Corinthians, you make a gift of God the basis for strife, for division, for jealousy, and for competition, then Paul says that you are carnal, not spiritual, no matter how gifted you are, or think that you are. Your faith may look pretty to others, and especially to yourself, but it lacks reality and substance.

James gives us a concrete illustration of this in the second chapter of his letter. He writes, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:14-17).

It is fine to say to the needy person, "I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," because a truly compassionate heart will indeed wish this person well, and will indeed wish this person to keep warm and well fed. However, a pure religion, a truly spiritual person, would do more than this. James is saying that you should also show that you mean what you said, and do something about this person's needs.

And so back in 1:27, James says that a pure religion, one that is faultless before God the Father, is one that will "look after orphans and widows in their distress." On another occasion, perhaps using another text, I would like to discuss how a church can implement works of charity. James here is talking to the church, and we should not interpret what he says from a perspective of extreme individualism. So I would like to talk about how *a church* can implement works of charity, why it needs rules and policies, and what kind of rules and policies the Bible would teach and support.

But while we are saving that for another time, the final words in this verse lead to an important warning about implementing works of charity in the church. There are right ways to do it, and the wrong ways to do it.

Now, if you read only the first part of this verse, which says that a pure religion is one that takes care of orphans and widows, and then you throw away the rest of the Bible, then you will end up with a humanistic religion, a social gospel that has no spiritual and saving power. Instead of a pure and faultless religion, you will end up with the antithesis of one.

There is a context, a background, behind all the charitable works that the church performs. and this background is faith in Jesus Christ. It is a grave error – a damning error – to suppose that Christianity is primarily a system of ethics, or that it is mainly a call to social justice and charitable works. To interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ as purely, or even mainly, a social gospel is to distort its message and rob it of its power. Good works do not make a pure religion, but it is the pure religion that produces these good works. This distinction must be maintained.

Some people are seemingly so eager to reach certain types of people that they would transform themselves so much to adapt, that there remains hardly any noticeable difference between them and the people that they are trying to reach. If they are so like those people, then why do they need to convert at all? If they go to these people and use the same slangs, wear the same kind of clothes, make the same kind of dirty jokes, sing and listen to the same worldly songs, and do pretty much everything that the unbelievers do, then these people have already been polluted.

James says that a pure and faultless religion does not only look after orphans and widows, but it also keeps oneself from being polluted by the world. This reinforces the idea that Christianity is not a social gospel. The biblical philosophy of ministry and of evangelism is to remove any unnecessary entrances without going to ridiculous lengths to do it. What is ridiculous, you say? One actual example is to paraphrase the entire New Testament into "street talk." When a believer goes to the "street" with this, right from the start he gives the impression that God does not care about the purity of his words, or at least *he* does not care about it.

Again, the biblical philosophy of ministry is to remove any unnecessary hindrances, but the misguided philosophy that we are now talking about believes that the way to reach the world is to show the unbelievers that we are not so different from them after all. From the perspective of effectiveness in ministry, faithfulness to the word of God, and from the perspective of maintaining a pure and faultless religion, if this is our philosophy of ministry, then we might as well let the orphans and widows starve.

What I am saying is that we cannot let social concerns drive our faith and practice, and we cannot let our message become a merely social gospel; otherwise, our entire enterprise will become powerless and meaningless. Our work will become one that saves the stomach but starves the soul. In fact, if the church becomes a merely social institution,

an organization to promote charity work and natural human welfare, then it loses its very reason for existence.

Now, the world would welcome such an institution, and it would love nothing more than for the church to become humanistic and powerless, rather than to hear it preach a message from heaven that also has ethical and social implications. Thus our social and charitable work must be driven by spiritual concerns and biblical principles. It must be a fruit of true faith and pure religion, and not the ultimate object, nature, or purpose of our faith.

3. POLICY ON CHARITY

PART ONE

In James 1:27, the apostle writes, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." In these several sessions, we are not going to say anything about orphans, but we are going to say a lot about widows. However, I have a broader purpose, and that is, in relation to the biblical verses that we will talk about, and in the context of discussing how the church ought to help widows in need, we will be also considering some general principles regarding church policy on charity. We will have no time to be exhaustive, but I hope that as individuals and as church leaders, you will take what I say and further investigate the subject from Scripture.

James does not give us the details as to how we must take care of the widows – he just says that we are to do it. For more instructions, we will have to turn to something that Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 5. We will read verses 3-16:

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds. As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.

If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

This is a large passage, and we are not going to cover every verse. Instead, we will focus our attention on verses 3-8, and will structure our discussion around that passage. I read all the way through verse 16 because there are some issues of interpretation that I would like to address first.

If you have a pen or pencil, I would like you to put a small mark after verse 8 and before verse 9, and then I would like you to mark off verse 16 from the rest. If you are reading from a version like the NIV, then that is already done for you. In the NIV, verses 3-8 form a paragraph, verses 9-15 form two paragraphs, and verse 16 stands by itself as a separate paragraph.

In verses 3-8, Paul offers some general but clear-cut instructions on how the church is to treat widows in need, and then he mentions "the list of widows" in verse 9. Some writers think that from verse 9 Paul begins a discussion about a separate group of widows, a group that is different from those he mentions in verses 3-8. According to them, in verses 3-8 Paul is talking about widows in need, but in verses 9-15, he is talking about a special order of widows, widows who are dedicated to the service of the church.

However, so far I remain unconvinced by the arguments that try to establish such a sharp transition between verses 3-8 and verses 9-15. Instead, it seems most natural to understand verses 9-15 as a continuation of verses 3-8, further limiting the number of those qualified for the church's support. That is, in verses 3-8, Paul talks about the general principles governing how a church must treat widows. But in verses 9-15, he enumerates some specific qualifications for those who are eligible to obtain the church's financial aid.

I will not mention all the arguments with which some writers try to assert that Paul begins to talk about another group of widows starting from verse 9, but I will just mention several examples of these arguments and why they can be immediately dismissed. The first example comes from verse 9, where Paul says, "No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty." Some commentators argue that if in verse 9 Paul is still talking about those widows who are eligible for the church's support, then it would be too harsh to require a widow to be over sixty before she becomes eligible for such assistance. Then, on the assumption that this is too harsh, and on the further assumption that Paul would not be so harsh, the argument then concludes that Paul must be talking about another group of widows beginning from verse 9.

The argument begs the question, assuming the very premise that must be proved. Why do these writers think that it would be too harsh for the church to withhold support from those under sixty? Where does this assumption come from, and what is its justification? Then, if this requirement is harsh, why do they think that Paul would never be so harsh? Rather, if in verse 9 Paul is indeed continuing with what he started in verse 3, then this

requirement is not too harsh, or if you insist that it is a harsh requirement, then this shows that Paul would indeed be so harsh.

Then, there is the argument that Paul has already finished talking about the widows who are in need of financial support by the end of verse 8, and so to say that in verse 9 Paul continues to talk about the characteristics of those who are eligible for the church's assistance would be to say that he brings up the same topic again right after he has just finished discussing it.

But this argument also begs the question. Rather, if verse 9 continues what Paul started in verse 3, then it means that he has *not* finished discussing the topic at the end of verse 8. It begs the question to say that verse 9 begins a new topic because verse 8 has ended the previous topic, and therefore verse 9 must be the beginning of a new topic. No, rather, if verse 9 does not begin a new topic, then verse 8 is not the end of what Paul started in verse 3.

One should consult the commentaries for additional details and arguments, but I am mentioning these examples precisely because many commentaries assert their position on this passage with these fallacious arguments. We should consider the arguments offered and make sure that they are sound before accepting the position proposed. As there is no clear and sharp transition between verse 8 and verse 9, it is more natural to assume that verse 9 does not begin a new topic, or a discussion about a separate group of widows. Instead, verse 9 continues with what Paul started in verse 3.

This position is reinforced by verse 16, which says, "If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need."

One commentator has just finished explaining why he thinks that verse 9 begins a new topic, that is, a discussion about a group or an order of widows different from those mentioned in verses 3-8. But then when he comes to verse 16, he has to say that Paul suddenly returns to the previous topic, about widows in need, or those mentioned in verses 3-8. But as there is no clear transition between verse 8 and verse 9, and as there is no clear transition between verse 15 and verse 16, it is much more natural to read verse 3 all the way through verse 16, as if Paul is talking about the same group of widows, only that from verses 9-15, Paul is giving specific instructions concerning which widows that the church should regard as eligible for support.

Now if one wants to argue that Paul is indeed talking about different group of widows, or an overlapping but clearly distinguishable group of widows, then he may still do so. However, he will have to offer better arguments than those typically proposed, that do not so obviously beg the question. One must not use a standard of judgment that does not come from the text itself, or for that matter, that does not come from anywhere in Scripture, and on that basis assert that Paul *cannot* mean something, and therefore he *does not* mean something. Well, if he *does* mean something, then he *can* mean it.

So arguments of this kind do nothing other than to impose one's standard of judgment upon Scripture, and then on that basis determine what certain passages can mean or cannot mean. Rather than an interpretation of Scripture, in which one carefully draws out the meaning of the text, this is a subversion of Scripture, and imposes one's non-biblical beliefs and standards upon Scripture, artificially restricting and manipulating the text.

To summarize, my position is that from verses 3-8, Paul discusses the general principles that govern how Christians should treat the widows who are in need, and who cannot support themselves. Then, from verses 9-15, Paul lists a number of specific principles and conditions that further limit the number of those eligible for such support. Finally, in verse 16, he summarizes his teaching on the subject.

Since verse 16 presents a straightforward and unmistakable summary of Paul's teaching, it must govern our interpretation of verses of 3-8. And if we are correct about verses 9-15, then verse 16 must govern how we interpret that portion also. However, since we will focus our attention only on verses 3-8, this is all that we need to emphasize for our study. That is, for our purpose, we only need to keep in mind that verses 3-8 and verse 16 go together.

We will not begin our main exposition of this passage until the next session, so I will just leave you with one thought about the purpose and the uses of this study. Those of us who have a basic understanding of biblical teachings realize that our main task is not charity or social outreach, but to preach a spiritual gospel. Of course, it is a gospel that carries implications about our physical needs and social relationships. However, it is still first a spiritual gospel, designed to save us from our sins and restore fellowship with God.

Again, that our primary interest is people's spiritual needs and spiritual concerns does not mean that we ignore their physical welfare. In fact, according to James, a faith is dead, false, and hypocritical if we will say to someone who is hungry and suffering, "I will pray for you," but then do nothing to help that person with his needs. As John says, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:17).

So, our purpose is first spiritual, and our message is first not a social but a spiritual gospel, although it is one that carries social implications. That is the way to look at it. Our question then, and the reason for this study, is to find out how we are to implement and carry out these social implications generated by our spiritual faith. Our passage for this study will tell us about our responsibilities, and it will also tell us how to prioritize our charitable works. We will see that the biblical teaching does not excuse a lack of compassion on our part, but at the same time, it will not tolerate idleness and licentiousness in those who request support and charity.

PART TWO

We began by noting that, according to James, a religion that is pure and faultless before God the Father is one that looks after orphans and widows in their distress. A person may consider himself a religious or spiritual man, and a great friend of God, but if he does not extend compassion to the needy, then he deceives himself about his own spiritual condition. He is not spiritual, but he is yet carnal and selfish.

Since the specific purpose of James is not to give detailed instructions on performing charity, but to expose spiritual self-deception, he does not tell us how Christians ought to help or support orphans and widows. So last time we turned to a passage in 1 Timothy, written by the apostle Paul. We read from chapter 5, verses 3-16. But rather than starting our exposition from verse 3, we had to divide the passage into two or even three parts. Verses 3-8 form one section, verses 9-15 form the second section.

Then, depending on how you interpret the rest, verse 16 either suddenly goes back to the first section, that is, verses 3-8, or if my position is correct, verse 16 is a summary of Paul's teaching in this entire large section that goes all the way from verse 3 through verse 15. In our study, we will not spend time dealing with verses 9-15, but we will focus our attention on verses 3-8.

Now we are ready to begin our exposition from verse 3. It says, "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need." A literal translation would be "widows who are really widows" or "widows who are widows indeed," and this is how it is rendered in the KJV, NKJV, NASB, and the ESV. The phrase, of course, refers to those widows who are truly alone and destitute, and so the NIV translates the verse according to its meaning, and says, "widows who are really in need."

Paul says that we are to give these people, that is, widows who are truly alone and destitute, the "proper recognition." The other versions give us the word "honor." What does this mean? The context makes the meaning unmistakable: Paul is primarily referring to the financial and material needs of these widows. The widows who are truly in need are those who cannot care for themselves, and who require the assistance of other people to survive. So the question now, is who should take care of them, and how.

In verse 3, Paul is instructing the church on how it should relate to widows in need, or more precisely, he is giving Timothy instructions on what he should teach the people and how he should operate the church, how the church should relate to these widows, and how the church should use its resources. He says that the church should give "proper recognition," that is, to give financial and material support to widows who are indeed widows, or to widows who are really in need.

Who are these widows who are indeed widows, and who are these widows who are really in need? The expression that Paul uses already tells us this. He says that the church should support widows who are indeed widows, and this means that not every woman

whose husband has died is a widow that the church should support. That are some widows who are not really "widows," not truly left alone and destitute. Widows who qualify for the church's support must be truly alone and without help.

The next verse elaborates: "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God." In other words, a widow who is indeed a widow, a widow who is really in need, is a woman whose husband has died, and is left without close relatives to support her. This means that if a woman whose husband has died has children or grandchildren who can supply her needs, then it is up to these relatives to support her, and not the church.

Notice what Paul says about these relatives. They are "children or grandchildren." For them to support their parents and grandparents who are left alone and destitute, and who requires financial and material support to survive, is a matter of putting "their religion into practice." James offers the very same reason for Christians to take care of widows and those who are in need – for him it is a matter of putting faith into practice as well. We may stumble in our faith, but a faith that is consistently denied expression suggests that there has never been any faith in this person to express in the first place.

Also, Paul speaks of the children or grandchildren who support their parents and grandparents as "repaying" them. This means that when children or grandchildren support their parents and grandparents, it is not so much a matter of charity, as it is an act of gratitude and repayment. It is an acknowledgment of a debt, a debt to those who with patience and endurance raised us into adulthood.

The acknowledgement of this debt and its repayment is also part of putting our faith into practice. Thus the ultimate reason for Christians to acknowledge this debt is their faith and not their filial piety, even in this matter of taking care of our own parents and grandparents. The Christian position is God-centered and not man-centered. It is based on God's precepts and not human welfare or a social bond. To acknowledge this debt and to do it on the basis of our faith, Paul says, is "pleasing to God."

Regarding the question of who are these widows who are indeed widows, and who are these widows who are really in need, we now have our answer. Paul is referring to those women whose husbands have died and left no relatives to support them. But if there are close relatives who can support them, such as the children or grandchildren, then the church is not to be burdened with them. Thus these widows must first go to their children or grandchildren for financial and material support, or better, the children or grandchildren should actively and eagerly offer their support. Once the women's husbands have died, the widows should not have to beg for the help that is owed them.

If these children or grandchildren refuse to put their faith into practice, and if they abandon their widowed parents and grandparents, then these women would become widows who are indeed widows, widows who are really in need, widows who are really alone and destitute. In that case, verse 3 would apply to them, and these widows would

become eligible for the churches support. As for the children or grandchildren who refuse to care for these widows, Paul will have something to say about them in just a few verses later.

And if these children or grandchildren are non-Christians, they might still decide to support their parents and grandparents out of ordinary human affections and a natural sense of responsibility, so that these widows would not be widows who are left alone and destitute, and they would not be eligible for the church's support. But if they are abandoned by the children or grandchildren, then of course verse 3 would again apply.

There is a related biblical teaching that we should bring up at this point. Besides giving us a better understanding of our passage, it will also serve as an example of why it is important to understand any biblical teaching in the light of the entire Bible. I am referring to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:14. There, he writes, "After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." We have no time to look at the full context, but if you look at the passage in your spare time, you should be able to see the relevance. Also, the idea expressed here is not found in an isolated part of Scripture, but it is taught throughout the Bible, both explicitly and implicitly, that the parents are to take care of the children and leave them an inheritance. Ideally, the children should not have to take care of the parent's financial and material needs.

That said, our passage in 1 Timothy 5 is not talking about the ideal situation. It is talking about a situation in which after her husband has died, a widow is left without the necessary finances to survive. She may be in such a state because her husband had squandered their earnings when he was alive. She may be in such a state because her husband had failed to make the necessary plans for her. Or, she may be left in such a state simply because her husband could barely earn enough for them to survive while he was alive, and could not save up anything for her. In the days of Paul, certainly there were many who could not leave their widows enough to sustain them for the rest of their lives.

Therefore, the children or grandchildren are to take care of these widows. Nevertheless, we must not undermine or discard the biblical teaching that, if at all possible, the parents are to save up for the children, and not the other way around. Paul says that "children should not have to save up for their parents." We may not always be able to attain the ideal, but we must always keep it in mind; otherwise, we will forget about it and never attain it, and the second-best will become the norm.

This teaching addresses something crucial to the development of a family. There is the pressure in some cultures and traditions for children to start giving money to their parents once they begin to earn their own incomes even when the children are struggling and the parents are not. The children are expected to give part their income to the parents as a matter of principle, and not because the parents are suffering and in need.

While we can admire the intention of gratitude and the acknowledgment of a debt owed to the parents, this practice can often cripple a developing family, and inflict damage

upon even the next generation, that is, the grandchildren. Even if this new family receives an inheritance from the parents afterward, fewer resources would have been devoted to establishing this new family during the grandchildren's developing years, perhaps when they needed these resources the most.

In 1 Timothy 5:4, the teaching refers to how the children or grandchildren should take care of their parents and grandparents who are, as verse 3 indicates, "really in need." So verse 4 does not apply when the parents are richer than the children. Of course, the children and grandchildren must still put their religion into practice, and they must still acknowledge their debt to the parents and grandparents in some way. Furthermore, it is also true that their needs are not only financial, but they have spiritual and social needs as well.

But it would be senseless to give part of the income to the parents when the parents have no need of it, and especially when the children need it much more. This is not an excuse for the children to abandon their parents, since the teaching is undeniable that if the widows, and verse 4 mentions even parents and grandparents, are in need such that they cannot survive without help, then the children or grandchildren must care for them. If you are a parent, know that you are entitled to your children's support when you are old, but if it is at all possible, you should make sure that this will not be necessary when the time comes.

PART THREE

We have been studying Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 5 regarding how a church should help "widows who are really in need." We have discussed the relationship between verses 3-8 and verses 9-15, and then also verse 16. Then, as we started our exposition, we have discussed verses 3 and 4.

As we noted, Paul does not say that the church should support every widow, but that it should support only the widows who are truly widows, those widows who are truly in need. By this, Paul is referring to those widows who are truly alone, so that they have no children or grandchildren to support them.

We mentioned the responsibilities of the children and grandchildren, that they must put their religion into practice, and that they are to repay their parents and grandparents, "for this is pleasing to God." In connection with this, we also referred to another biblical teaching, namely, that the ideal is that the parents should leave an inheritance to the children rather than having the children support the parents. However, when this is not possible, the children should demonstrate their faith by supporting their parents out of gratitude.

Now we have arrived at verse 5. We must remember that in this verse Paul is continuing what he started in verse 3. In other words, he continues to expound on the idea that the church should support with those who are truly widows, widows who are truly in need, and he is continuing to explain who these widows are. It would help us to retain this connection in our thinking by reading verse 3 and then verse 5 right away, temporarily skipping verse 4, as right now we will be dealing with verse 5.

Thus, Paul says, "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need....The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help." Verse 3 tells us that the church is to support the widows who are really in need. In verse 4, Paul excludes those widows who have close relatives to support them. Now in verse 5 he further elaborates on the type of widows who are eligible for the church's support.

First, he repeats that the church is to support the widow who is "really in need." She is someone who is "left all alone." And the kind of widow that Paul has in mind is one who "puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help." So the apostle is not concerned only about a widow's financial condition when considering whether a widow is eligible for the church's support. The church is also to take a look at her spiritual condition. A widow who is eligible for the church's support, besides being really in need and left all alone, is also one who hopes in God and who prays night and day. She is one who depends on God.

Then, Paul makes his meaning even clearer, for when we move on to verse 6, he refers to a widow whose characteristic is the opposite of the one in verse 5. He writes, "But the

widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives." The words "lives for pleasure" refer to someone who is self-indulgent, who lives for luxury and who does not demonstrate the reverence and the dependence of the widow in verse 5. Some commentators think that even if this widow does not resort to prostitution, the expression suggests that her luxury comes from other men, from immoral living. Spiritually speaking, Paul obviously intends to convey the idea that she is the opposite of the widow in verse 5, and he says that she is "dead even while she lives."

Remember that Paul is not giving a general description of a spiritual widow in verse 5 and an immoral one in verse 6 for no particular purpose, or as a digression, but he is continuing what he started in verse 3. He is elaborating on the kind of widow that would be eligible for the church's support. Clearly, the widow in verse 6 must be denied and excluded.

After that, in verse 7, Paul tells Timothy, "Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame." This is the policy that a church leader is to implement in the church, and he is to instruct the people about these things and the principles by which the policy is determined. Following the biblical policy is crucial in maintaining the church's honorable reputation, which is a constant concern of the apostle.

Now, if our interpretation of verses 9-15 is correct, then Paul would continue to elaborate on the kind of widows that are eligible for the church's support, and he would indicate that these widows must be willing to work for the church. Certainly, a widow who is in decent health, who is not disabled, should be willing to serve the church in exchange for its support.

What reason is there for the widow, who is left all alone, to refuse to dedicate the rest of her life to the church that is now supporting her? Every Christian should be willing to serve the church in some way, but how much more should a widow be willing to serve, who no longer has other responsibilities, and who now receives her livelihood from the church? For her to refuse would make her resemble the widow described in verse 6, that is, one who lives for herself and her own pleasure.

In addition to the spiritual concern by which he determined this policy, Paul also shares his practical concern in verse 16: "If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need." The church is not to be "burdened" with helping people who could receive support from somewhere else, especially from close relatives.

We can summarize Paul's policy this way: The church is not to neglect the widows who are really in need, but it cannot offer support to every widow. Practically speaking, it must be realistic about its own limitations, so that it must exclude all those who could obtain their support from somewhere else. Spiritually speaking, it must protect its purity and its reputation, so that it must not tolerate those widows who are self-indulgent, who

are living selfish and immoral lives, and who would squander the churches support on luxurious living.

It is the consistent teaching of Scripture that the church should not be blindly sympathetic to those who appear to be in need, but it must consider why a certain person is in need, and whether the church is this person's last resort. In fact, Paul explicitly instructs his churches to be firm with people who are in need due to their own fault, and who otherwise would not require the church's support.

For example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul writes, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us." He does not say that the church should indulge him and to keep him alive while giving him time to repent or anything like that. He says to keep away from him, to shun him, to exclude him. And then in verse 10, he writes, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'"

There is no indication in the text that Paul is joking or exaggerating. You might say, "Certainly, Paul does not intend for us to let this person starve to death, does he?" Again, the question assumes that the apostle would not implement such a harsh treatment against anyone, but as with before, this begs the question. Unless there are biblical passages found elsewhere that would preclude this straightforward interpretation, this verse is explicit instruction for us to allow the idle person to starve.

However, when this is the policy, this person might just get back to work in order to survive. But if you do not starve him, you might never know. Those passages on love and compassion, and others like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, do nothing to contradict this understanding. They just do not apply in a manner that would tell us to support the idle person, since the person does not really have a need that the church must supply – he just refuses to work.

We must still consider verse 8: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." This naturally follows from Paul's concern, as stated in verse 7, that "no one may be open to blame." But he adds an interesting statement here that confuses some people. It seems straightforward enough for many, and it appears that most commentaries offer the correct interpretation on it, but if one reads it from a particular angle and with certain assumptions in mind, it can indeed be perplexing.

I am referring to the last part where he says that a person who does not provide for his relatives "has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." It sounds to some that the phrases "has denied the faith" and "is worse than an unbeliever" must indicate that such a person is unsaved.

A person who abandons his relatives, and especially his immediate family, might indeed be unsaved, and this type of behavior is certainly sinful and displeasing to God. However,

it is not the necessary implication from verse 8 that such a person must be unsaved. Remember that in verse 4, Paul says that the children or grandchildren should take care of the widows who are really in need, and he says that this is to "put their religion into practice." The opposite, of course, is to "deny the faith," that is, not necessarily in creed, but certainly in conduct.

As for the phrase "worse than an unbeliever," Paul cannot be referring to salvation. If Paul indeed has salvation in mind – if he has the *fate* of the person in mind – then there is nothing worse than the fate of the unbeliever. The most that one can say is that this person will suffer the same fate as an unbeliever. Rather, the phrase corresponds to Paul's concern as stated in verse 7. There he says that Timothy should relate these instructions and insist on them, so that "no one may be open to blame." Since even unbelievers would often take care of their own relatives, and especially their own parents, a Christian who refuses to do the same is certainly behaving worse than an unbeliever.

If a person claims to be a Christian, but who consistently denies the faith in practice, and whose behavior is consistently worse than (or the same as) an unbeliever, then this is an indication that the person has never been a Christian. That Paul declares this person "worse than an unbeliever" in fact suggests that he is not referring to salvation, but to a person's behavior as compared to the usual practice of the unbelievers. Paul's concern is for the church's reputation and God's honor.

PART FOUR

Let us review what we have covered so far. I have been speaking from 1 Timothy 5:3-8. First, we discussed the relationship between this passage and verses 9-15, as well as verse 16. But other than affirming a continuation from verse 8 to verse 9, and then all the way to verse 16, we have not discussed the content of verses 9-15. Instead, we have focused our attention on verses 3-8, and also verse 16.

Verse 3 says that we must "Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need." We proceeded to consider who these widows are. Verse 4 indicates that a widow who is truly a widow, or a widow who is really in need, is one who is without children or grandchildren to take care of her. In such a case, the church should intervene and supply for her needs, that is, provided that she also fulfills the other conditions mentioned in our passage. In addition, this verse indicates that the children and grandchildren are to take care of their parents and grandparents because this is to "put their religion into practice" and to repay the debt that they owe to their parents and grandparents, "for this is pleasing to God."

Then, in verses 5 and 6, Paul mentions two different kinds of widows. The first one is really in need and left all alone. She puts her hope in God and continues night and day in prayer, and to ask God for help. She walks in faith and godliness. The second one lives for pleasure. She is self-indulgent and wallows in luxurious living. The money enables her to live in such a licentious manner comes, if not by prostitution, then probably from immoral relationships with other men. A wealthy widow who has inherited her money from the deceased husband still falls under Paul's description if she is self-indulgent, wallows in luxurious living, and lives for pleasure. She is "dead even while she lives."

Verse 16 gives us Paul's practical reason for insisting that the church follows his policy in taking care of widows and in performing charity. He says that the church should not be "burdened" with those who are not really in need, and with those who have other people to take care of them. But there is a spiritual reason as well, and that is stated in verse 7 and 8 where Paul says that the church must follow his instructions, so that "no one may be open to blame." When a church formulates and implements a policy, it is important that it upholds the honor and reputation of God and of the Body of Christ. We are to show that we are clean and honest in all of our dealings, and free from all wrongdoing and scandal.

Although the main part of our exposition is complete, there are several loose ends that I would like to tie up in this final session. In particular, I would like to expand on this last point about the purity, the honor, and the reputation of the Body of Christ. The key is to implement a policy that demonstrates compassion, and that at the same time does not generate suspicion and create scandal in any way.

A church must have a biblical policy on charity, on taking care of widows and orphans, and it must adhere to such a policy. Any deviation from biblical instructions can lead to

great destruction for the parties involved and dishonor to the Lord. When we stray from the biblical guidelines, not only those stated in our passage but also in the rest of Scripture, disaster is almost inevitable.

One fairly prominent theologian, the son of a much more prominent theologian, had established a church with the intent that families can form an intimate community and effectively implement a homeschool system. In a book where he discusses family and parenting, supposedly from a biblical perspective, he offers an illustration on how his church dealt with the needs of a widow. Let us consider what we can learn from it.

In short, this woman's husband had died and left her with several children. Since they were not wealthy, right away the widow began to face seemingly insurmountable financial problems, definitely more than what she could handle. She could try to find a job, but then she would have needed someone else to care for her children. And since this was a homeschool community devoted to obeying the "cultural mandate," the church naturally wanted to offer her a better solution.

So the church agreed to take care of much of the widow's financial needs. However, to the elders of this church, an equally pressing problem was that there was now a void in this family that only a man could fill. As far as the elders were concerned, there were various things related to the operation of a household that were more appropriately performed by a man. And what about the children? Now they no longer had a father figure in their lives.

It happened that another family from the same church lived quite near to this bereaved family. So the elders came up with the idea that the man of this family should now take on many of the roles that the deceased man used to fulfill. The man agreed to this and began to spend a lot of time over at this other family's place. He would help the widow do chores around the house, fix things that needed to be fixed, and so on. He would help the children with their school work, play sports with them, take them to places, and generally try to fill up part of the void that was left when their father died.

This is an abomination. Do you not see it? Perhaps my description is not as vivid and thorough as the one this theologian gives in his book, but in effect the church had asked this other family to share the man with the bereaved family. From the description given in the book, the man was spending *a lot* of time over at this other family's place, and he was performing every function that the deceased husband used to perform other than to have sexual intercourse with the widow. Now, who would be stupid enough as to be surprised if very soon he had taken on this final role as well? Apparently the possibility never occurred to the church elders, and if it did, apparently they thought the danger was not great enough.

Everything was wrong about this decision. The man's family was left with half a husband and half a father. With the husband spending so much time at the other place with a lonely widow, the wife was now subjected to jealousy and suspicion – there must have been something seriously wrong with her if she was not jealous and suspicious, if she was

satisfied with such an arrangement. Under the circumstances, if she had said anything, she probably would have been accused of being selfish and insecure. Still, she should have fought it like she was fighting for the very life of her marriage and family. I do not know whether she did or not. In any case, part of what makes a woman secure in her relationship is that her husband does not spend half of his time over at a widow's place, and spend hours and hours playing with the other woman's children!

As for the newly bereaved widow, she suddenly had a new man in her life that was assuming every non-sexual role that her husband used to fulfill, including the role of a father figure to her children. Who could guarantee that there would have been no temptation to take the relationship further? The church practically signed a warrant to commit adultery by sending her a man to be with her for many hours each week behind closed doors.

What about the children? They had just lost their father, and now another man, even if not a complete stranger, entered their lives and took on every role that their father used to fulfill. They might not see this man kissing their mother – yet – but was this supposed to assure them, or confuse them? What was he doing there if he was not in love with their mother? Why, their father had just died, and was their mother welcoming another man into the home so soon? Why was he acting like their father? How long was he going to assume this role?

The apparently compassionate thing to do is not always the right thing to do. Here the church made the most superficial decision possible. When the head of the house dies, the family is supposed to suffer loss. Things are supposed to change. The wife and children are supposed to sense the void that he has left. The church can do a lot to help alleviate their pains and their needs, but it cannot just pick a man from another family and plug him right into the bereaved family, telling him to take on all the roles of the deceased husband except that of a sexual companion to the woman. And the church cannot expect the wife of this man to share her husband with another woman, even if supposedly in a non-sexual way.

What a disgrace. What a shameful, stupid, stupid, stupid decision. What an abomination and dishonor to the Body of Christ. This church probably ushered this man right into the bed of this new widow, and thus destroyed two families at one stroke. And what were the elders going to do if the man had committed adultery with the widow? Discipline them? Excommunicate them? They were the ones who told the man to spend hours and hours over at the widow's place. They would have to excommunicate themselves along with them.

The church could have chosen from a great number of options in helping this bereaved family, any one of these options or any combination of these options would have been far superior to sending one man alone into a widow's home day after day. The church could have sent different *couples* to take turns in helping the family. It could have encouraged greater participation of this family in the church's various activities. What this church tried to accomplish by sending this one man into the family could only be done by the

widow's remarriage to another man. This man would then properly function as a father figure to the children, and to perform all the functions that the deceased husband used to perform. And there would be no adultery, no scandal, no confusion. If the widow had refused to remarry, then she would have needed to raise the children by herself, with the help of the church and the community, but without a husband or a father, and certainly without a husband or a father borrowed from another family.

This theologian relates his story as something that he is proud of, and as something that he wishes other churches would emulate. He thinks that what the church did was intelligent, compassionate, and effective. But I am ashamed of him. Paul says that we are to be beyond reproach, but this was a scandal in the making. It robbed one family of its husband and father (or at least half of him), injected temptation and confusion into the bereaved family, placed the man in the difficult position of caring for two families (to be a husband and father to one, but then a friend and father to another), tainted the widow's image and reputation, and thus also insulted her deceased husband.

I wonder what these elders would have done for a family whose wife and mother had died, that is, if they would have suggested that another family share a woman with the widower and his children. That would have been at least as dangerous and scandalous, if not more so. As such a community develops, there would be other widows and widowers, and I wonder if they would order the same to be done in each case. And if so, what they would end up with is mass spouse sharing, deep strain and suspicion in marriages, and numerous cases of adultery practically arranged by the church.

Can you understand why we need a *biblical* policy when it comes to charity, and helping orphans and widows? It is because, on the one hand, people can be selfish, and on the other hand, they can be very stupid and a little insane, as in this case. The Bible has given us a policy to follow, and church leaders ought to be firm and decisive in teaching it and implementing it. And please, if you are going to sin and defy the Bible, at least do not pair up people to commit adultery with one another!

A biblical policy will do more than to prevent abominations such as the one in our illustration. Since such a policy has been derived from Scripture, believers can follow it with confidence, knowing that they are obeying the will of God as they do so. This in turn protects them from doubt as to whether they are doing the right thing, from the subjective guilt of thinking that they are not doing enough, from the objective guilt of really not doing enough, and also from the manipulation of swindlers, and from many unbearable and unnecessary financial burdens.

On the other hand, since the biblical policy is a moral mandate imposed upon Christians by God, it also serves to protect the rights of orphans, of "widows who are really in need," and of others who are to receive help and support.

Finally, a biblical policy, while compassionate, is also intelligent and righteous. It does not encourage sloth or tolerate licentiousness, but it insists on both charity in those who give, and godliness in those who receive.

4. THE NOBLE BEREANS

ACTS 17:11

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

When Christian ministers and believers mention the Bereans, they usually have in mind a group of individuals who had discernment, and who were not easily fooled by just any new message that came along, because they were careful to check up on everything that a preacher said with Scripture. These were not gullible people, and they were not about to accept anything someone taught unless it came right out of Scripture. And since Scripture calls these people "noble," it is appropriate to imitate their example.

This in itself is a sound biblical teaching, and other parts of Scripture also confirm it. For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:21 says, "Test everything. Hold on to the good," and 1 John 4:1 warns, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

However, in directing most of their attention to the latter portion of Acts 17:11, which says that the Bereans "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true," many people have failed to recognize the main thrust of the verse, and one of the main points of the first half of Acts 17.

The real virtue of the Bereans is asserted by the main emphasis of the verse, and not in the explanation or qualification to the main emphasis of the verse. Since the Bereans are so often presented as models worthy of our imitation, a distorted or partial view of their virtue would result in a distorted or partial imitation, and thus a flawed character in precisely the area in which we wish to learn from them.

The main emphasis of verse 11 is easy to grasp if we will just read the whole verse, and then the verse in the context of the first half of Acts 17.

The word translated "noble" can refer to either noble birth or noble character. It is clearly used in the latter sense in our verse. As for in what way the Bereans were noble, the verse applies the word to them *in contrast* with the character of "the Thessalonians." Therefore, to understand the Bereans' noble character, we should first return to the beginning of Acts 17 and read about the Thessalonians:

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was,

Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. (v. 1-4)

Whenever Paul arrived at a new location in his missionary journeys, it was his custom to first visit the local synagogues so that he could preach to the Jews (see v. 10, 17).¹ The Jews professed faith in the Scripture, and it should have been natural for them to eagerly embrace a message declaring the perfect fulfillment of scriptural promises. Thus Paul "reasoned with them *from the Scriptures*," and it was on the basis of Scripture that he preached the gospel, and this means "explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead."

As a result, a number of people (both Jews and Greeks) believed and were saved. But these were not "the Thessalonians" that verse 11 is talking about. Rather, the problems appear starting from verse 5:

But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. (v. 5-9)

Out of a jealous resistance to the gospel message, these Jews incited a riot in the city against the apostles. They manipulated the situation against these preachers of the gospel by leveling misleading accusations against them. Verse 10 shows how the Christians helped Paul and Silas escape to Berea.

Religious politics is a hideous evil, and it is rampant in our day. Even in the best Christian circles, theological conflicts are often not carried out by only rational discourse, but also by inciting the crowd, and by applying social and political pressure. One side of the issue is often preferred by the crowd and by the institutions, and thus biblical arguments and reasoned appeals are often suppressed and drowned out.

Sometimes a semblance of a refutation might appear, but even then, the often unbiblical and irrational position is still supported more by its popularity with the people and the institutions than by biblical revelation. But those who stand firm on Scripture and

¹ For a detailed exposition on the second half of Acts 17, in which Paul deals with a non-Jewish audience, including some Greek philosophers, please see my *Presuppositional Confrontations*, chapter 2.

Reason² have nothing to fear, that is, except for the very souls of those who persecute them.

In any case, it is in contrast with *these* Thessalonians that verse 11 praises the noble character of the Bereans. Accordingly, we should expect the virtue of the Bereans to be the opposite of the vice of the Thessalonians. Right away, we realize that this virtue cannot be that they checked up on the preaching of the apostles; otherwise, it would imply that the vice of the Thessalonians was that they were *too quick* to believe the gospel, but verses 5-9 tell us the opposite.

The virtue of the Bereans was the opposite of the vice of the Thessalonians in that the Bereans "received the message with great eagerness." Unlike some of the Jews at Thessalonica, the Bereans did not doubt or resist the gospel message, and they did not persecute the preachers or give them a hard time. This is Scripture's main emphasis in verse 11, and when seeking to imitate the Bereans, it is this characteristic that we must first recognize and consider.

Many commentaries fail to acknowledge this primary emphasis or to give it the proper place in their expositions, and at this moment I cannot recall hearing even one minister who made this the main point in his sermon when he preached on verse 11. I do not doubt that some ministers have recognized the primary thrust of the verse and have preached accordingly, but these instances seem to be too few. Instead, the verse is most often used to teach discernment, and in a way that obscures the positive characteristic of the eager acceptance of God's word.

Along with several others, Matthew Henry is one notable exception to this neglect. For a commentary that has to cover much ground, he nevertheless devotes a significant section to how the Bereans were eager to receive the gospel. The section that immediately follows on discernment is only slightly longer. He writes:

They neither prejudged the cause, nor were moved with envy at the managers of it, as the Jews at Thessalonica were, but very generously gave both it and them a fair hearing...They did not pick quarrels with the word, nor find fault, nor seek occasion against the preachers of it; but bade it welcome, and put a candid construction upon everything that was said. Herein they were more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica...³

It is only with this in mind that we can properly understand verse 11, and to understand with what attitude the Bereans "examined the Scriptures." The Bereans were noble in character not because they were suspicious or hard to convince, but because they were teachable and receptive to the gospel. For this reason, some translations and

² Scripture is a revelation of Christ the Reason, or *Logos*, and only what is scriptural is rational. In this sense, I equate the two.

³ *Matthew Henry's Commentary, Vol. 6: Acts to Revelation* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 179.

commentaries suggest translating "noble" as "liberal," "generous," "fair-minded," or "open-minded."⁴

However, this "open-mindedness" is at the same time specific and restricted. It is at this point that we should proceed to the latter part of the verse, which tells us that, although the Bereans were eager to hear from God, they were not at all foolish or gullible people. And because we have already considered the main point of the verse, which is to say that they were teachable and receptive to the gospel, we are now ready to consider how this openness is qualified.

They were nothing like the people of Athens, who "spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (v. 21). They were not eager to hear the apostles out of mere curiosity or for intellectual stimulation and entertainment, and they were not open to just any new theory or doctrine that sought their attention. Rather, they were interested in learning the truth, in whether "those things were so" (KJV), and not just in hearing something that sounds interesting or unusual. And to determine whether "those things were so" that Paul preached, they "examined the Scriptures."

Thus they showed that they were "open-minded" not in the sense that they were foolish or gullible, and still less were they relativistic or pluralistic. They were not open to just anything or anyone. But by striving for truth, they showed that their openness was rational, and by searching the Scripture, they showed that their openness was biblical, such that all non-biblical theories and doctrines were *excluded from the start*. This is also part of their noble character, and this is also what believers today must emulate.

Moreover, since it is in this manner and on this basis that "many of them believed," it also showed that theirs "was no mere emotional response to the gospel, but one based on intellectual conviction."⁵ Theirs was a genuine faith, an intellectual conviction about revealed truth, and a spiritual life founded on this biblical and rational conviction can survive the tests of persecution and temptation.

Just as we should follow their example as hearers, we should not be satisfied with anything less from our audience as preachers. And this means that Christian ministers must strive to be the same kind of preachers that the Bereans heard, so that like Paul, we should preach and reason "from the Scriptures, explaining and proving" Christ to our hearers.

Still, because of the imbalanced way that many people have applied our verse, we must again remind ourselves of its main point, and the main reason why the Bereans were called noble. They were not commended because they were suspicious and hostile, but because they were eager to hear the gospel.

⁴ Although these translations are consistent with the intended meaning of the verse, it is better to retain "noble," since the original word refers to something of high quality, whether in terms of birth or character. The context suffices in telling us in what sense and in what way the Bereans were noble, and something like "open-minded" seems too interpretive, losing some of the verse's original meaning.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 280.

Their attitude was, "You have brought us a good message from God, let us also see it from the Scriptures," rather than, "Don't take us for stupid and gullible people. We are not going to let you get away with anything, and we won't believe anything that you say unless you prove it to us from the Scriptures." Now, the first attitude does not reflect any gullibility either, but it is characterized by a noble character, an openness to God's revelation.

God is not pleased when discernment becomes resistance and hard-heartedness in disguise. As Scripture says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 4:7). Christians of "noble" character are not maliciously suspicious, but they are intelligently teachable. They respect God's messengers; they are eager to hear God's word; and they are quick to believe and quick to obey.

So if we are going to emulate the noble Bereans, then we will readily receive God's word from faithful ministers, and we will be so eager to affirm and practice the truth they proclaim that we will examine the Scripture "every day" (v. 11), so that we will construct our right belief and worship on the sure rock of revelation also.

Let us continue to teach believers to "test everything," but when we speak about the Bereans, let us also accurately relate the nature of their noble character, that they were eager to hear and receive the word of God. And we must not lose this simple devotion to the word of God even if we think that we have gained much knowledge and discernment; rather, let us stay humble, teachable – and noble.

5. THE ONE THING NEEDED

LUKE 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

A full exposition of our passage should explain how it fits into the broader concerns of the Gospel, noting the Lukan motifs of hearing, service, hospitality, journey, and so forth.⁶ For our modest purpose, however, a brief and narrow treatment will have to suffice.

Although the episode begins with "Jesus and his disciples" traveling together, it immediately narrows its focus on Jesus.⁷ Then, for the rest of this narrative unit, we read only about his relation to Martha and Mary, and perhaps also a little about the relation between these sisters (v. 40), while the disciples fall to the background.

Luke does not identify the "village," but he mentions that Martha and Mary had their "home" there. John also mentions these sisters, and there he writes that they lived in Bethany (John 11:1), about two miles from Jerusalem (John 11:18).

The verse says that "a woman named Martha opened her home." Martha seems to be the one who takes the initiative in the biblical narratives (v. 38; also John 11:20), who is responsible for the affairs of the household, and who is more socially active and aggressive. Probably for this reason, it is often assumed that she is the elder sister.

Mary, on the other hand, appears more passive (v. 39; John 11:20, 28-29), but nevertheless thoughtful and passionate (John 12:3). In fact, she appears more spiritually advanced than some of the others in her grasp of Christ's significance and in the way that he ought to be treated (see John 12:1-8).

⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 433.

⁷ Even if it is *possible*, contrary to one interpretation, it is not *probable* that the disciples have temporarily parted ways with Jesus by the time he arrives at the village.

While Martha welcomes Jesus as an honored guest, Mary welcomes him as a spiritual Teacher. One welcomes him from a social perspective, and the other from a spiritual perspective. The two are not in inherent conflict, but one cannot act in a manner that gives equal emphasis to both. So the question remains: Is Jesus *a Teacher* who happens to be a guest, or is he *a guest* who happens to be a Teacher?

Luke writes that Mary sat at the feet of Jesus to hear his words. At this point, Luke refers to Jesus as "the Lord," and this is to be repeated before this episode is over. That she "sat at the Lord's feet" indicates more than her physical posture, or even a submissive attitude, but the expression identifies her as a disciple. Paul was "brought up...at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3, KJV).

The idea of discipleship is reinforced when Luke writes that Mary has assumed this posture to hear the teachings of Jesus. This directly connects this episode to the "hearing" motif so evident throughout this Gospel. Consider Luke 6:47⁸ and 11:28,⁹ and of course, the parable of the sower (8:4-15), too long to reproduce here.

What Luke describes here is unusual not only because a woman has taken a disciple's position under first-century Judaism, but also because Jesus permits and then even defends her decision to be his disciple. We will say more about this later.

Martha, on the other hand, is so distracted by all the things she does to welcome her guest that she fails to pay attention to his teachings. Her behavior is not obviously wrong. She is the hostess and a woman, and she is acting according to social propriety and expectation. But man or woman, then or now, it is never socially proper or expected for one to become a true disciple of Christ – to hear and obey his teachings will always entail defiance against the world's standards and expectations.

Finally, Martha bursts out in frustration, not directly at Mary, but at Jesus: "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" She could have said, "Lord, I would like to be a good host and give you and your disciples a warm welcome, and usually I would be expected to perform all that I am doing. However, instead of helping me, my sister Mary is sitting at your feet listening to your teachings. Should she be helping me, or should I sit down with her and listen to you?"

Instead, without asking what Jesus prefers, and more than assuming that Jesus would side with her, Martha assumes that he *should* side with her, and she is annoyed *at him* that he has not already done something about the situation. Her frustration has led her to falsely judge Mary's behavior, and then also the Lord's tolerance of what she perceives to be Mary's negligence.

Lenski thinks that Martha's complaint exhibits no irreverence or faultfinding against Jesus. He writes, "But this would have been open impoliteness and rudeness, and Jesus'

⁸ "I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice."

⁹ "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."

reply indicates nothing of this kind."¹⁰ However, this argument begs the question, as it is based only on Lenski's speculation as to what Jesus' reply *would have been* if Martha's statement had exhibited "open impoliteness and rudeness." In fact, one may more naturally say that her statement indeed exhibits "open impoliteness and rudeness," only that Jesus' reply demonstrates his patience toward her.

Lenski continues: "Some have found open disrespect in the words, 'carest thou not' but forget Martha's address, 'Lord,' and the obvious reply that Jesus would have had to make, namely promptly to withdraw."¹¹ In other words, he thinks that it is impossible to address Jesus as "Lord" and show disrespect at the same time.

But this is a naïve interpretation, and it is Lenski who has forgotten all the biblical examples in which, even the prophets who addressed him as the Sovereign and Almighty in the same breath, have sometimes expressed frustration against God. Of course, any complaint that is more than an expression of personal need and distress, but that amounts to finding fault with God, is illegitimate and sinful. At times, they were patiently encouraged; at other times, they were sternly rebuked.

Lenski's argument implies that one must always speak as a thoroughgoing atheist or non-Christian when one exhibits irreverence, but this is false. One mode of irreverent behavior is precisely to recognize who God is and then speak as if he is not who he is, or to acknowledge his wisdom, power, and justice, and then speak in a way that questions his wisdom, power, and justice.

To call Jesus "Lord" and then criticize or contradict him only makes one's irreverence all the more sinful. By Lenski's reasoning, Matthew 16:16 would neutralize any irreverence in Matthew 16:22. But to "rebuke" Jesus, as if to correct him about his own mission on earth, and after one has just called him "Christ, the Son of the Living God," only makes Peter's irreverence all the more glaring and inexcusable. Thus the response, "Get behind me, Satan!" (v. 23), is altogether appropriate.

So, let us qualify and soften our criticisms against Martha in whatever way that is appropriate – let us say that she errs out of frustration and ignorance, but not malice – but we must not dismiss what she says altogether. Her statement is indeed impolite and irreverent.

This is, therefore, a warning to us about the frustration that can arise when we are anxious over doing what we think is appropriate and necessary, instead of following God's program of discipleship. And this frustration can lead to a false judgment against our

¹⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 614.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Lenski again refers to "the *obvious* reply that Jesus *would have had* to make." But this is nothing more than speculation, and it is not obvious at all. It is illegitimate to speculate about what Jesus *would have* done unless Lenski can demonstrate that it is a necessary implication of something that is *in the text*, or in some other parts of the Bible.

brothers and sisters in Christ, and an outburst of irreverence against the very God that we claim to promote and worship by our distracted condition.

In response, Jesus offers Martha a rather gentle correction. His criticism is twofold. First, she is "worried and upset." Her agitated state of mind prevents her from maintaining correct judgments and priorities, and to assume the position of a disciple of Christ. Second, she is worried and upset "about many things." Thus she errs both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Martha's condition prevents her from obtaining the spiritual benefits that is readily available because of Christ's presence, and from focusing on the one thing that is needed. In contrast, Mary is sitting at the Lord's feet, in the position of a disciple, to hear his teachings.¹² She has chosen rightly, and Jesus defends and protects this choice, saying, "it will not be taken away from her."

From a "history of redemption" perspective – that is, from Luke's own broader concern about how this episode fits into the rest of his Gospel and then also the rest of Scripture, and its significance in the progressive unveiling of God's plan, in which the work of Christ is a climax (Hebrews 1:1-2) – this passage is concerned not only with showing us the priority of the contemplative over the active and the spiritual over the social, or even the fact that *women* as well as men are to become the disciples of Christ and to receive doctrinal instructions. It teaches us all these things and more.

Christ is the highest revelation of God, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). His coming is a personal manifestation of God's kingdom, and for one to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness is to become his disciple, to give him the priority, and to hear and obey his teachings (Matthew 7:24-29). To become his disciple means more than to make him one minor aspect of our lives, but it means to let his teachings invade every area of our thought and conduct. This in turn transforms our beliefs, agendas, expectations, and relationships.

Many expositions of our passage fail to note its redemptive-historical context. On the other hand, it would be wrong to think that the grand purpose of this passage forbids us to derive from it some narrower lessons. In fact, it is these specific and practical implications that teach us how to daily operate as Christ's disciples in this world, and thus fulfill the broader concern of this passage. A correct approach, therefore, would keep both aspects in mind.

Christ calls his elect to become his disciples, and this means the same thing in our day as it did in Mary's day – we are to hear and obey the teachings of Christ, and to build our lives on his word. To become a disciple means that we are to give our Master and Teacher the priority in our lives. For us to become attentive to Christ's teachings implies that we cannot be equally attentive to other things at the same time. In other words, if our

¹² "According to the rabbis, learning Torah is better than any other activity," Craig A. Evans, *Luke* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), p. 179.

agendas and activities remain exactly the same as before, then there is no sign that we are his disciples at all.

Then, being his disciples will often require us to defy the expectations of others and the roles that they assign to us. Indeed, our passage uses a female disciple to make a point, and in doing so, it makes a point about female discipleship. Whatever roles society and even Scripture assign to women, our passage forever declares that women's first right and duty is to be disciples of Christ – that is, learners after Christ.

Some people may think that this is no longer an issue, at least in their parts of the world, but in many churches even today, while discipleship means "hear and do" for the men, it means just "do" for the women. Sometimes, this is not a policy that has been deliberately adopted, but simply assumed. But at other times, it is a philosophy that has been consciously adopted because of unrenewed thinking or a faulty theology.

The problem exists in a different form even in those parts of the world in which women have been "liberated." In these parts of the world, it is assumed that women have the right to become disciples of Christ not because of the teachings of Scripture, but because this right has been "given" by society, just as it is withheld by other cultures. In neither case is the policy toward female discipleship dictated by divine revelation.

On the one hand, the women's right to become disciples is withheld by suppression; on the other hand, the women's right to become disciples is granted by insurrection, even against the very roles assigned to them by the Scripture, so that they will "hear" but not "do." While it is right and necessary to defy the social expectations that hinder us from following Christ's teachings, it is self-defeating to defy the word of God also in order to seize the right to hear the word of God.

The right of women to become disciples of Christ and to benefit from all the teaching programs that the Church has to offer comes from the declaration of Christ himself, that this "will not be taken" away from them. Just as we must disregard society's prohibition against anything that Scripture commands, we do not need society's permission to perform that which Scripture demands. Therefore, there is no conflict between granting women full access to all the biblical and doctrinal training available to men, while at the same time enforcing what Scripture teaches regarding their roles in the home and the church.

As stated, the passage uses a female disciple to make a point – it does not just make a point about female discipleship. This "point" is that Christ calls all the elect to become his disciples, to learn and follow his teachings, and that one's role as a disciple supercedes all his other roles in family and society. And this is why being a discipleship of Christ will often entail defying social expectations and restrictions. It would be a mistake to apply this only to women, but we must see that the full rights and duties of discipleship apply also to the uneducated, to the laymen, and even to children. They must also "hear and obey," and not just "obey."

Most sermons and commentaries on this passage are careful to warn us against Martha's misguided priorities and to set up Mary's example as one worthy of emulation. However, a large number of them fail to note that Jesus also serves as an example that is directly relevant to many Christians.

It is true that Jesus is unique, and no one else can occupy his exact position in any situation. Yet, many of us play various roles in our lives that are analogous to the role that Jesus plays in this episode. That is, some of us are in positions to defend and protect the spiritual rights of the "Marys" in our lives, and to encourage the "Marthas" to imitate the "Marys." People who are in such positions include ministers, teachers, husbands, and parents.

Our passage teaches the minister to enforce a program of discipleship that emphasizes hearing and doing, instead of just doing, and to preach a spiritual gospel that is founded on faith that produces good works, rather than a merely social gospel. Churches should offer theology classes before lunches and picnics. Or, at least they should have lunches and picnics for the purpose of preaching and discussing the word of God.

Classes on theology and biblical studies must be opened to all kinds of individuals – men, women, the uneducated, the rich, the poor, and children *of all ages*. Contrary to the assumption of many, children who are only three to four years old are fully capable of understanding basic teachings on God, creation, sin, salvation, death, justice, punishment, heaven, and hell.

If not for the unfamiliar theological vocabularies, any child should have already read something on the level of Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* by the time they enter the first grade. The concepts are not difficult, but the words take time to learn. The solution is for the parents and ministers to teach them these things in simpler language. But in terms of content, there is no need for dilution at all.¹³

Some parents think that they are spiritual heroes if they have succeeded in teaching their children the Shorter Catechism by the time they are around fourteen or fifteen. I might agree with this if these children (or the parents!) have Down's Syndrome or something like that (but even then I wonder); otherwise, these parents have failed miserably in fulfilling their duty.

If children can be taught evolution by their teachers before they reach the third grade; if they can understand the adultery, sodomy, rape, murder, theft, and perjury portrayed on television and video games; and if they can grasp and apply the concepts of courage, revenge, death, demons, and the supernatural assumed in many children and teen novels, then surely they can understand much more theology than what most parents and ministers give them credit for.

¹³ See my lecture series, "Great Expectations," on children's potential for early intellectual development, or as my position goes, their *normal* intellectual development.

As it is, many parents let the world indoctrinate their children first, starting in kindergarten, in the hopes that they will then turn everything around by teaching them biblical doctrines and ethics later, perhaps by the time they enter high school. Some segments of the Church are better than others in this area, but still too many tend to think that theology is a rather "adult" subject. But the time to start learning is the moment a child begins to understand language.

If a child can attend a theology class without being disruptive, then he *must* be admitted. The church must accept him into the class, or make some appropriate accommodation for him. Children must be given the chance to excel, to read theology books and biblical commentaries, and to ask the ultimate questions. Some of us might have been extraordinarily slow, but this is no reason to hinder those who are normal, and there might be several who are geniuses. Never measure your child's potential by your own limitations and failures.

From this perspective, I oppose dividing classes into different levels according to age and gender, although it is appropriate to divide them into levels (beginning, intermediate, etc.) *regardless* of age and gender, at least so that the teachings are not completely unintelligible to the beginners, whether children or adults. Some churches, sometimes for very legitimate reasons, insist on dividing their programs by gender. This is fine, but do not begin by teaching the women to sew and cook – teach them basic theology and exegesis first. Make them *disciples* – make their service to God a *rational* service, and help them build their lives on biblical understanding.

Our passage is not only or even mainly about female piety, but it has a lot to do with it. In a marriage relationship, the husband's position is analogous to that of Jesus' here, having the authority to either encourage or hinder the woman's spiritual progress, and to pursue a normal course of discipleship.

The husband's first duty is to love the wife, and this is expressed by imitating the way that Christ loves his church, in sanctifying her by the word of God. That is, as a husband, you must love your wife by helping her progress in sanctification, in knowledge and in holiness. Therefore, to imitate Jesus' example in our passage, you must defend and protect her right to learn as a disciple of Christ, hearing and obeying the word of God.

This has a number of practical implications. For example, it might mean that when your wife wishes to serve you or the home in a particular way that she considers as part of her duty, you should sometimes encourage her to read a systematic theology or biblical commentary instead. But does it not remain that some things in the home must get done? This is true, so *you* go do them.

The point is that you must assist your wife to grow as a disciple of Christ, in both thought and conduct, in knowledge and in holiness, even if this entails making some sacrifices on your part. You must acknowledge that she is a fellow-heir to eternal life (1 Peter 3:7), that she is just as much a disciple as you are, and then you must act like it. This is the fruit of true love, as Christ loves his Church, and also your duty as a husband.

6. AS A MAN THINKS

PROVERBS 22:29-23:8

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.

When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive.

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.

Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.

Because the Book of Proverbs imparts wisdom through many short and pithy sayings, its statements are easily taken out of context and misapplied. And when that happens, few people notice. One good example is Proverbs 23:7, which says in the KJV, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." For the purpose of misuse, it is even more convenient to say, "For as *a man* thinks in his heart, so is he." Saying "as a man" instead of "as he" removes the verse further away from its context, for now no one would ask who the "he" is. The verse could then appear to stand on its own, and thus this is the way the verse is often cited.

Many New Age and "Christian" teachings on positive thinking have adopted this verse as their motto. To be precise, they have adopted the *first* part of the verse, since quoting the second part would be sufficient already to expose their abuse of the first. For them, the words, "As a man thinks, so is he," summarize their teaching that a person *is* what he thinks and that a person *becomes* what he thinks.

The Bible indeed teaches this in one sense, but not in the sense intended by the false teachings. In one sense, the Bible teaches that a person *is* what he thinks (even in Proverbs 23:7) and that he *becomes* what he thinks (but not in Proverbs 23:7). To illustrate the latter, a regenerated person increases in wisdom, holiness, and even success partly by thinking on biblical precepts and patterning his life after them.¹⁴ In other words,

¹⁴ Among many others, see Psalm 1 and Psalm 119:97-105.

by God's grace and power, the believer *grows into* the biblical precepts that he meditates about.

Thus in this sense the Bible does teach that a person *becomes* what he thinks. It warns about what we entertain in our minds, and offers specific guidelines as to what we should think about. As for the sense in which the Bible teaches that a person *is* what he thinks, we will discuss this later when we are ready to offer the correct interpretation on Proverbs 23:7.

It is important to note the differences. New Age teachings deviate from Scripture when it comes to the means of our transformation, and when it comes to the objects and the purposes of our thoughts. According to them, the *means* or the power for positive transformation is not God's power in regeneration and sanctification, but the latent power of the human mind. This power is often described as almost supernatural, and it is sometimes explicitly said to be so. Then, the proper *objects* of our thoughts are not necessarily biblical, but anything positive that would help us achieve the desired result. As for the *purposes*, they are never to give God glory or make man holy, but to achieve selfish and greedy goals, or at best to benefit humanity apart from God, and apart from repentance and submission to him.

These teachings suggest that a person *is* what he thinks and that a person *becomes* what he thinks in a very different sense than what the Bible teaches. The New Age teachings emphasize developing self-confidence and unleashing man's innate power, so that you will *become* the person that you want to be if you think that you *are* the person that you want to be – your mind will make it happen. If you think that you *are* rich, you will *become* rich; if you think that you *are* healthy, you will *become* healthy; if you think that you *are* successful, you will *become* successful. And if you think that you can do something, you can. If you cannot do something, think that you can, and you will be able to do it. For after all, as a man thinks in his heart, so is he.

Although the specific theories and techniques vary, it is teachings such as these that have hijacked Proverbs 23:7. Unfortunately, many professing Christians, especially some of those in Charismatic circles, have adopted similar teachings, and have abused our verse in a similar manner.

The verse has a context, which controls and limits its meaning. So to properly understand it, we should return it to its context, and see what the verse as well as the whole passage have to tell us. To do this, we will first go back to Proverbs 22:29 and start there.

We *could* start from 23:1, and the next several verses would give us enough context to grasp verse 7. But it helps to take a quick look at 22:29, since it suggests one way of how someone would get to a situation like the one described in 23:1 in the first place.

The verse refers to someone who is "*skilled* in his *work*." The word translated "skilled" denotes a readiness and quickness to accomplish one's tasks, as well as a good understanding about the nature of the work. It speaks of competence and efficiency.

Some translations construe the word as if it refers to external excellence, such as in craftsmanship. For example, the REB reads, "You see an artisan skillful at his craft: he will serve kings, not common men." Although the verse could include external skills, translating it this way obscures the primary emphasis, which is competence and efficiency in intellectual tasks. Then, the GNT changes the verse altogether: "Show me someone who does a good job, and I will show you someone who is better than most and worthy of the company of kings."

The Jerusalem Bible says, "some man *sharp* at business," and the New Jerusalem Bible, "someone *alert* at his business." These are better since they capture at least one aspect of the excellence described by the verse. The God's Word translation – "a person who is *efficient* in his work" – seems to emphasize another aspect. The NKJ says, "a man who *excels* in his work," which is not bad.

Matthew Poole prefers "expeditious," saying that the verse refers to someone who is "speedy in executing what hath been *well* and *wisely* contrived."¹⁵ Delitzsch notes that this "skilled" man must have an "intellectual mastery"¹⁶ of the task at hand. *Barnes* suggests that this refers to "the gift of a quick and ready intellect."¹⁷ The same word is used in Psalm 45:1, and there it is often translated "ready," as in "a *ready* writer," thus suggesting competence and efficiency in intellectual tasks. In any case, the type of person described is the *opposite* of stupid and slow.

The type of "work" here is probably that of a scribe or official. The verse does not seem to suggest a narrow restriction, although *Strong* mentions that the word refers to employment that is "never servile."

Kings, rulers, and high officials constantly seek out those who exhibit expertise and excellence in their work. People like this – smart, quick, and efficient – are often promoted to work with great men, instead of being held back with obscure people.

There are more than a few biblical examples to illustrate what the verse says. For our purpose, it is sufficient to quickly read through several of them without comment:

GENESIS 41:9-14, 33-43

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard. Each of us had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us, giving each man the interpretation of his dream. And things

¹⁵ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible, Vol. 2* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 258.

¹⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 6* (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 335.

¹⁷ *Barnes' Notes: Proverbs to Ezekiel* (Baker Books), p. 63.

turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged."

So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh....

"And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine."

The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

1 SAMUEL 16:14-23

Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.

Saul's attendants said to him, "See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the harp. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes upon you, and you will feel better."

So Saul said to his attendants, "Find someone who plays well and bring him to me."

One of the servants answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the LORD is with him."

Then Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, "Send me your son David, who is with the sheep." So Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them with his son David to Saul.

David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers. Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, "Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him."

Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

DANIEL 1:17-20, 2:46-49, 5:11-12

To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom....

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court....

"...There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father – your father the king, I say – appointed him chief of the

magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

Someone once told me that when he wanted something done at work, he would often state the same instructions to an employee three times and make the person repeat them back to him. Even then, sometimes the person would *still* fail to do what he was told. The person who said this to me was a partner in a major accounting firm, which as one would expect, hired only the best people. But if the best are this disappointing, then no wonder the competent and efficient are ushered into the presence of kings.

One ministry lamented that they had to implement in their hiring policy a three-month probation period for every new employee. This was because many people expected very lenient treatment from a Christian organization, and so they showed up late and left early, and daydreamed in between. But Christians ought to exhibit excellence in what they do, and if they lack skill or talent in a particular area, they should at least demonstrate sincere effort.

The temptation here is for me to rant about the incompetence and the poor work ethic of even many who call themselves Christians. But since we have set our sight on 23:7, we must save this topic for another time and move on.

Kidner suggests that in 23:1-8 the "perspiring social climber is gently chaffed."¹⁸ Whether or not the person is already "perspiring" or merely warned in advanced, verses 1-3 indeed picture him as having climbed quite a distance on the social ladder. Now as he dines before a "ruler," Wisdom urges caution and offers advice.

People who occupy high positions are very busy – they have many ambitious agendas and face pressures from all sides, and if they have time for it at all, they must also consider the needs of their people. Their every move is political and calculated, and everything that they do must contribute to their overall agenda.

This is not always as sinister as it sounds. It is indeed possible for a high-ranking official, a king, or a president to serve with the intent to glorify God and edify people. But for such a rare individual to survive and succeed in his position, he must be all the more clever, discerning the intentions of men and the effects of his actions. All people of high positions in any realm of society must be "shrewd as snakes," but believers must also be "innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

Nevertheless, it remains that people in high positions are political and calculating. Most of them are unbelievers, and their intentions are far from godly. At the least, one should realize that their every move contributes to a political purpose other than the one that it apparently serves.

¹⁸ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (InterVarsity Press), p. 151.

They help the poor not necessarily – and never *only* – because they want to help the poor. For good or for evil, it is a calculated move. They support harsh measures against criminals not just because they want to ensure your protection, but they certainly wish you would think that. And when they turn to advocate the rights of these same criminals, they are not just interested in upholding justice for all, but they certainly wish you would think that, too.

Every move is calculated; every action has a purpose. The relevance to our passage is that this also applies to whom they invite to dinner. The passage teaches that when one who is in a high position invites you to dine with him, or to be his guest at a party or special function, it is probably not out of pure hospitality. He probably wants something from you, or maybe he thinks that you can contribute in some way to his agenda.

At the least, the way you behave will be watched and noted. Thus you must realize the significance of the occasion, and consider who and what are before you. You must be extra cautious in what you say and what you do. Our passage notes that this includes how much you eat. It says that this is especially important if you are easily tempted to overindulge.

If we could generalize, when entering a situation like the one described here, it would be wise to become aware of one's embarrassing habits and weaknesses, and exercise extra self-restraint in those areas. One must avoid offending the host with foolish talk and unrefined behavior, or to say or do anything that would imply that one is unsuitable for important assignments and positions.

Depending on the intention of the host, the feast before you might be outright "deceptive," or it might be a sincere gesture of hospitality. Either way, the wise man watches his guests – the wise guest knows it, and watches him right back:

LUKE 7:36-50

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is-- that she is a sinner."

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Again, although verses 1-3 teach us what is especially important when dealing with someone in high position, and someone with the authority to make or break a person, the general principle is applicable not only in such a potentially dangerous and "deceptive" situation, but even when we interact with a lesser individual.

To illustrate, several years ago someone asked if he could work for me as a volunteer.¹⁹ As we had already known each other for a while, there was no need for formal introductions and references. The problem was that based on our previous interactions, I was aware of some of his flaws that would have rendered him an ineffective resource, if not an embarrassment, to the ministry.

He had several serious problems that disqualified him, but I will mention only the comparatively minor ones here, since these are precisely the things that we are concerned about at this time, even things like how much a person eats when he is dining with one in authority.

I told him that I would give him the opportunity to demonstrate that he had become an organized and responsible person. As his minister, although I had repeatedly confronted him over major issues before, I had overlooked many minor ones, since we were still

¹⁹ To protect the person's identity, I have altered several details that are non-essential to the illustration.

mere acquaintances. However, now that he had asked to work for me, albeit just as a volunteer, I told him that I would begin holding him to the strict standards of this ministry.

Again, here I do not have in mind obvious things that would disqualify a person like drugs and violence. I told him to send a document to me with the original on top, the copy on the bottom, and the carbon paper in between. I explicitly told him not to retain the copy for himself but to send it to me as well. He did not listen – he sent me the original and not the copy, but at least he included the carbon paper!

I told him to obtain some information for me from the Boston City Hall. He procrastinated until I had to ask again. Here is a hint: when you work for someone, once he asked for something, he should not have to ask again. Unless there is some special problem or previous arrangement, the next time the subject is brought up, it should be when you deliver what he had asked, and right on time. Anyway, I asked again, and then he went and found me the wrong information.

Then, punctuality is always an important issue with me. It is not just a matter of respecting the other person's time, although this is certainly a part of it, but when you tell a person that you are going to meet him at a certain time, you are giving him your word.²⁰ And if your word is no good, then you are no good. If you say that you are going to do something, then make it happen.

With this person, it used to be that he would agree to meet me at a certain time, and then when he arrived late, he would give all sorts of excuses. But all the problems he mentioned could have been avoided if he had planned to arrive *early*, as I always do with any appointment, instead of just planning to arrive on time, if even that. As I recall, after some admonition, he corrected this, and that was commendable.

Moving on to even smaller details, I noted the manner in which he placed the stamps on the envelopes that he would send me. They were crooked and all over the place. The envelopes would usually be somewhat wrinkled, and sometimes I would find coffee stains on them. Now, unless he respected other people much more than he did me, I could only imagine how he would treat those who would correspond with this ministry.

I told him not to use all small letters when he sent me emails – he did not listen. I told him to neatly divide his messages to me into sensible paragraphs – he jammed everything together into one huge block of text. I told him that I disliked abbreviations – he used them freely.

I told him to speak clearly, conveying complete thoughts with complete sentences: "State the subject and the object, and relate the two properly, so that I will know who is doing what to whom!" It is amazing that even many college graduates cannot do this. But with

²⁰ The very fact that some people do not think of punctuality this way is telling enough. They consider only formal promises as binding, and not their ordinary speech. Their words are cheap. See Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

their mumbling lips and shifting eyes, they will test your patience to its limit. To get a coherent message out of them, you have to be a modern-day Socrates, asking probing questions to guide their answers and to extract the needed information out of them.

Details like these piled up so that I wondered, "Does he really care about the work? Is he nearly competent enough to perform even the simplest tasks? Is this how he will represent this ministry if I allow him to work with me?" Needless to say, I did not accept him as a volunteer. And if I must be this strict with a volunteer (although I think my demands were reasonable), I would certainly never pay someone like this to work with me in the ministry. Still less should a person like this, who lacked a most basic level of competence and discipline, be allowed to teach spiritual things.

Everyone should be taught and trained in these things as a child – that is, to speak clearly, present oneself neatly, always arrive early, follow instructions, and so on. These should be ingrained habits by the time a person reaches his teenage years, if not much earlier. Once in a while there might be a mad genius that is unrefined and disorganized, but mad geniuses are rare, and the rest are without excuse.

When he started as a young man, that successful partner at the large accounting firm, whom I mentioned earlier, had his lessons to learn also. He practiced very well, almost to perfection, all those things that I have mentioned so far. But born into a poor family, he did not know the ways of high society. As a new hire, he was invited to a cocktail party organized by the company. He was excited, but also quite nervous, since he had seldom been in situations like this one. So he was more than a little embarrassed when one who was a partner of the firm at the time came across the room and scolded him for wearing white socks with his black shoes to the function. He told me that the partner was right – he did him a favor by telling him this. If he was going to circulate among those people, then this was something that he needed to learn.

As a child, my father would harshly rebuke me whenever I yawned or looked away while he was dictating to me some serious instructions. Now, was he being too strict, or was I supposed to learn it later by offending a person of high position and losing favor with him? Then, my mother saw to it that I always chewed with my mouth closed. They took me to dine at expensive hotels – to teach me things like which silverware to use for different dishes, and why it took three hours to eat a French meal that left me more hungry than before I started – so that I would become thoroughly accustomed to such things and not embarrass myself later in life.

Later, they sent me to a school that daily enforced in its students the habits of gentlemen. For example, a formal dress code (jacket, tie, trousers, dress shoes) was imposed for classes, meals, and chapel. And when it was too hot, we were required to ask the teacher in charge and acknowledge the female students before removing our jackets. The girls had to wear jackets, long dresses, and dress shoes. Unlike some places, the costumes of whores were frowned upon.

It is true that all of this training addressed relatively superficial things, and it was not until God sovereignly changed me by his grace that I started to know truth and mercy in my heart. You can place a tuxedo on a pile of wet horse dung, and this is what I think of the non-Christian elite. You cannot hide the overwhelming stench from a spiritual man, and still less from God. Nevertheless, Scripture (especially in Proverbs) gives a place to these things as the lessons to learn for one to excel in human society, and they indeed befit the true gentleman who does all things in the fear of God and for his glory.

You are mistaken if you think that we have strayed far from Proverbs 23:1-3. Besides telling them to control their appetites on sensitive occasions and in front of important people, we have been considering some of the other related things that parents should teach their children while they are still young. Of course, most adults need to review some of these lessons as well, that is, if they are not learning them for the very first time. Our passage refers to acting with discretion in a potentially deceptive and dangerous situation (because of the powerful personage involved), whereas we have also considered several other areas by applying the general principle, that we should act with discretion because our actions are often watched by people, and from what they notice they make inferences about our background, character, and competence.

One purpose of Proverbs is "To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion" (1:4, KJV). The opposite of materialism is not barbarism. Just because we as Christians are supposed to be "spiritual" does not mean that we must also be bums and slobs. If anything, we must learn to function on all levels of society – not too refined to embrace the poor and despised, and not too crude to impress the rich and mighty. David was one who obtained the trust of outcasts (1 Samuel 22:2), but also gained the favor of royalties (1 Samuel 18:1-5).

Nevertheless, as the next two verses from Proverbs tell us (23:4-5), no matter how hard you try, and how much care and discretion you exhibit in your work, wealth, status, and favor can fly away at any moment. There are countless ways that this can happen. You might offend someone who could cause you trouble. Maybe those on whom you depend for your wealth and status no longer have any use for you. Or, maybe some natural disaster destroys all that you have accumulated. Sometimes it will be because you have made a mistake, or it might not be your fault at all. In fact, wealth, status, and the favor of men can sometimes disappear precisely because you insist on doing right.

Consider Joseph. He perfectly illustrates Proverbs 22:29-23:1-3. He was competent and efficient in his work, and he exercised great discretion, so that he was promoted to manage Potiphar's entire household and all of his possessions (Genesis 39:1-6). But when he resisted the seduction of his master's wife, he was falsely accused of assaulting her and was thrown into prison (v. 7-20). Even more quickly than he was promoted, he lost his status, his favor, his comfortable environment, and even more important than these, his good name. Thus he also illustrates Proverbs 23:4-5: "Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone."

Daniel "was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:4), so that "the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom" (v. 3), but his enemies set a trap for him. One moment, he was at the height of his power (v. 1-3), but the next moment, he was thrown into the lions' den (v. 16). In this instance, he was vindicated and restored, but this serves only to illustrate again the unstable nature of material prosperity. In his story, only God's grace and Daniel's faith were constant. Also consider Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). God was faithful to his elect even during their exile, but wealth, status, and favor come and go.

This is true not only when we are talking about business and politics, but the same applies when it comes to the ministry. In the ministry, people's loyalty and financial support can come and go, sometimes due to no fault of your own, and often because you insist on doing the right thing.

A woman became an ardent supporter of my ministry several years ago upon hearing my recorded lectures.²¹ She was not only excited about the teachings she was receiving and recommended them to others, but she also began to make regular donations. These donations were large enough to affect my operation. In addition, because she owned a retail business, she was able to donate a number of useful items from her company.

Her support and enthusiasm never relented, but even increased over time. But then she started listening to the teachings of a certain prominent televangelist. Some of his doctrines were outright heretical. When I learned about this, I gently warned her about him, and showed her numerous examples of how this person's teachings departed from central biblical doctrines, and how he constantly abused Scripture by making false inferences from it.

She was shocked and outraged, not at the televangelist's heresies, but at the fact that I would speak against him. It did not matter to her whether I was right or wrong about his doctrines, but that I warned her against him at all was enough to indicate that I was at fault. She declared that she would no longer support my ministry. I offered to refund her a fairly large donation that she had just sent in, and she took it. I never heard from her again.

Thus in one day – within several minutes, in fact – I lost a zealous supporter and a significant source of income. I knew this was a possibility when I decided to warn her, since I understood the very thing that I am illustrating here. So her reaction did not surprise me, but it was still disappointing. She never received any solid biblical teaching before she discovered my ministry, so perhaps there was not enough time for her to develop discernment. Or, perhaps her heart was never truly converted to the truth. Whatever the reason, I would have done the same thing even if I knew that this was how she would have reacted. I am a shepherd, not a hireling. If I could not do my job, then I would have no right to her support and her money in the first place.

²¹ To protect the person's identity, I have altered several details that are non-essential to the illustration.

Another incident occurred when I was a college student. A woman heard my radio program on Boston's WROL and gave me a call. She was the choir director at her church, and she said that she could probably get me an invitation to preach there. Everything was going well until she told me with great resentment that she left her previous church because the pastor cancelled an animal rescue program that the church did not have the money to maintain. When I agreed with her pastor and said that she seemed to be harboring much bitterness in her heart, she screamed at me, cursed my radio program, and hung up the phone.

Reactions like these never surprise me, and if you have not already guessed, I will give you the biblical reason for this in just a minute; nevertheless, they are always disappointing to experience. Neither of these women rejected my ministry because of my doctrine or character. In fact, both of them approved of my doctrine and enjoyed my teaching style. They turned against me because I crossed some of their strongly held preferences and opinions.

Of course, not everyone loses wealth and favor because he insists on doing right, but many people lose everything because they behave in a foolish and sinful manner. The point is that wealth, status, and favor can easily come and go whether or not you are righteous or unrighteous, and whether you are dealing with believers or unbelievers.

There is an intriguing comment attached to the end of John 2, that is, after Jesus turned water into wine: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:23-25). I read this when I was very young, and I have never forgotten it. Jesus did not commit himself even to those who believed in him. Why? Because "he knew what was in a man."

Since the word "believe" is used in both instances, the verse could be translated, "They *believed* in him, but Jesus did not *believe* in them." It is true that at least some of them were probably false believers, claiming to follow Christ when they had no genuine faith. But this only reinforces the point. Jesus was not swept up by his popularity. He knew that, although the fame and favor would increase even more for a while, very soon many would no longer follow him (John 6:66). As for those who remained, "It is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (Mark 14:27). And that was what happened.

In one place, Paul wrote, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:16). Those were not unbelievers who deserted him, for they were never with him in the first place. No, *Christians* deserted him. Those were *Christians* who left him to fend for himself. Perhaps some of them were false converts, but this possibility carries only limited practical relevance. As long as there are false believers and weak Christians in our midst – it is not always easy to tell them apart, and even those that appear to be strong are often revealed to be weak under pressure – it is also possible that they will desert us at our greatest time of need.

Some Christians follow mobs. They are intimidated and influenced by them. So when a minister is widely criticized, some Christians would back away from him, even if they used to support him. I have experienced some of this, too. Often, both the mobs and the deserters are Christians. And when the wave of criticisms pass, or when the person regains favor, then some of the deserters might return. But this kind of support is deceptive and worthless.

Have you read the story of Samson (Judges 15)?²² Three thousand cowards from Judah came to betray him, their own anointed deliverer, to the enemies of God. As always, Samson was fearless, but he made the people promise him that they would not kill him themselves before handing him over to the Philistines. That he even had to ask this accentuates his courage and their cowardice.

So even the people of God can be fickle and spineless. But this is why most of them are going to be followers all their lives, and this is why they need strong shepherds to direct and teach them, lest they be scattered.

If you are satisfied to be an echo in ministry, repeating the popular opinions of others, never contradicting cherished traditions, then you can just be part of the mob. But if you are going to be a strong leader, and do great things for the kingdom of God, then you will have to come to terms with this reality, that you cannot put your trust in people, not even Christians.

In fact, several Christian businessmen have told me that one must be twice as cautious when dealing with those who claim to be Christians. They are usually the first ones to sell you out, stab you in the back, and disappear with your money. But long before they told me about their experiences, and even since I was a teenager, this is what I had been telling people who started new jobs and business ventures. I learned from the Bible that you cannot trust people.

Come to think of it, I have never heard even one businessman tell me that all people are basically good and trustworthy, and that the path to business success is to trust other people. I assume that there are people who think this way, but I just have not encountered any of them so far. Perhaps most of them are already out of business?

No matter how pathetic, grotesque, extreme, or gruesome, every instance of human depravity is merely another illustration of what Scripture consistently teaches about the sinful nature of man. Thus, although we could feel disappointed and even outraged over some of the things that people do, we should never be surprised by the weakness and wickedness of men, even as exhibited by those who claim to follow Christ. To be surprised means that either we have not read the Bible, or that we do not believe it.

Whether in business or politics, but especially in the ministry, a leader must accept the fact that people are weak without becoming bitter about it. There will always be cowards

²² See Vincent Cheung, *Samson and His Faith*.

and weaklings. There will always be traitors and deserters. Thus Paul wrote, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me," but added, "May it not be held against them" (2 Timothy 4:16). This is just the way they are, even those who claim to be Christians, and if it makes us think any better of them, many deserters are just spineless, not malicious.

But Paul expected better things from Timothy: "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, *or ashamed of me* his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (2 Timothy 1:8). By the power of the Word and the Spirit, some will grow to become strong and reliable individuals, capable of leading others to maturity. However, this is not common.

This bleak view of human loyalty may be depressing to some people, but it is what Scripture reveals about people. Christians should and could be better than this, but they are often not, or at least not yet.

Popular opinion urges us to trust in people, for only then can we have healthy relationships and achieve success. Unfortunately, even many believers have accepted this, and assume that it is the biblical attitude. However, Scripture teaches the opposite, admonishing us to place no confidence in man.

This is what the LORD says: "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

"But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." (Jeremiah 17:5-10)

It is on the basis of this admonition, that we should have no confidence in man, that Scripture also instructs us concerning the only proper alternative. Returning to Jesus and Paul, the former did not only say, "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone," but he also added, "Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32). And after saying, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me," Paul wrote, "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength" (2 Timothy 4:16-17). This is why we do not

despair at the fact that people are unreliable, because God is always reliable, and we place our trust in him alone.

You may ask, if people are unreliable in general, and if no one is perfectly trustworthy, then is it still possible for us to maintain healthy and meaningful relationships? How can we function in society at all? In reply, we need to reinforce rather than relax the biblical teaching on human depravity, but then also make a proper application of it, so that we do not deny the kind of relationships that Scripture encourages.

What we are saying here is not founded on a cynicism generated by experience, but it is the Scripture that teaches us about the wickedness and the deceitfulness of men. It teaches us to be "shrewd as snakes" (Matthew 10:16), and to "be on your guard against men" (v. 17). Although these particular expressions appear within a definite context, and we would not want to illegitimately universalize them, they also aptly represent what other parts of Scripture tell us about dealing with people.

Some relationships do not require total trust in the first place. For example, total trust in a business transaction is unnecessary, and given the reality of sin, outright foolish. Even if you trust the other person completely, he certainly does not trust you completely, that is, unless he is as foolish as you.

Rather, business transactions are driven to completion mostly by financial and practical motives, and prevented from failure by legal contracts, self-preservation, long-term selfish interests, and so forth. Of course, Christians should not make these their primary motives for conducting business, but the reality is that these are the reasons that sustain the market, and the transactions would continue even if there is almost total distrust.

But what about relationships that are meant to be more intimate and enduring, such as relationships within the family and the church? Must we be constantly suspicious? Should we doubt everything that is said to us? Is it necessary to expect the worst from everyone, even our family members and fellow believers?

No, because these relationships are different from business relationships. The immediate purpose in business is to make a profit, and avoiding deception and disappointment is paramount. Only a fool would continue a business relationship in which he is repeatedly deceived and disappointed, *even if* he chooses to maintain personal relationships with those who have deceived and disappointed him.

The purpose and expectation for maintaining relationships in the family and the church are different. In these more intimate relationships, sacrificial love ought to dominate, and we should not concentrate on how to profit from other people. We do not constantly bargain or negotiate, and we do not regulate these relationships with contracts, or enforce them in the court. In fact, if we were to treat these intimate relationships as we would business relationships, we would destroy them.

Instead, those who understand human nature acknowledge the reality of sin even in their intimate relationships, and they *expect* to be occasionally deceived and disappointed even by family members and fellow believers – sometimes due to their inability, and sometimes even due to malice. And when sin surfaces in these relationships, we do not deal with them as we would in business.

As Scripture says, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" (1 Corinthians 6:7). Thus, when asked how we can maintain healthy relationships with people when they are so sinful, and when we are going to be deceived and disappointed by them, we answer, "You enter into these relationships with the intention to love, to give, and to build up, and *expect* to be occasionally scorned, betrayed, cheated, and otherwise disappointed."

Of course, we may take certain measures to protect ourselves, and to minimize unnecessary damages and losses. For example, it may be a bad idea to lend money to a certain relative known for his drug addiction, and it would be unwise to conduct business with a professing Christian known for his unethical practices. But still the primary motivation would not be profit or self-preservation, but fellowship and edification.

As eager as we are for deep fellowship and community, we must not build our relationships on a view of man that contradicts biblical teaching. Rather, we must always acknowledge the depravity of man, and for believers, also the progressive nature of sanctification. Now, then, the key to having healthy relationships and at the same time acknowledging the reality of sin is to place our trust in God instead of man.

If Christ is the bond and love is the motive, then intimate and meaningful relationships are possible even though we realize that no mere man can legitimately deserve our total trust. If this is the foundation for our relationships, then we will also have a firm basis on which to forgive those who sin against us.

Our trust would be in Christ alone, and the friendship that we extend to others come from the motive of love, and not profit or self-preservation. Such a motive cannot easily turn into fear, anger, or cynicism, since it is not counting on the other person to be perfect, and it does not require the other person to be the source of our strength and happiness, for we have already obtained these things from Christ.

To trust in God alone means that we will never depend on a man for something that he can never give in the first place. The result is that, rather than preventing healthy and meaningful relationships, this understanding gives us the liberty and courage to pursue the deepest humanly possible relationships with even imperfect and sinful people, relationships that are not easily destroyed by sin. This is because, from the beginning, we would not lie to ourselves that the other person is sinless and flawless, or for that matter, that we are perfect ourselves. But we would realize that only God is perfect, and only he

is completely trustworthy and almighty, both willing and able to perform all his promises.²³

For some, this biblical answer produces another question. That is, if Christ is the only proper bond between meaningful human relationships, and Christian love is the only proper motive, then does it follow that there can be no deep and sincere relationships between non-Christians, or between non-Christians and Christians?

We affirm this without hesitation. When the ultimate commitments between two parties are directly opposed, or when they are both evil, then genuine love, peace, and hope are always impossible.²⁴

We will revisit the concern about cynicism again and add to our answer, but right now we need to reconnect all that we have said in this section with the context of our passage, Proverbs 23:4-5.

Verse 5 says that riches are fleeting, that such things as wealth, status, and favor are unreliable. There are a number of ways that material success can disappear overnight, but we have focused on *human* fickleness and dishonesty, mainly because the surrounding verses emphasize how people can complicate situations by their deceit and ulterior motives (v. 1-3, 6-8).

What is asserted in verse 5 provides the explanation for verse 4, which says, "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint." There are some translation issues with both parts of this verse, but especially the latter part.

All the common alternatives are taught in other parts of Scripture, and so in this sense there is no immediate doctrinal danger. For example, the latter part of the verse has been variously rendered, "cease from thine own wisdom" (KJV), "have the wisdom to show restraint" (NIV),²⁵ and "cease from your consideration of it" (NASB).²⁶ The first option would mean that one should stop determining his priorities by human wisdom, or to cease striving after riches through human wisdom. The second option conveys the idea that it is foolish to pursue something as fleeting and unreliable as riches, and so one should have the good sense to stop, that is, to refrain from putting all of his strength into obtaining material success. The third one simply means to stop engaging the mind with how to get more riches – stop being obsessed with it.²⁷

²³ Consider how this would offer a firm foundation for a marriage relationship. On this basis, one would regard God as the source, provider, and the bond, and the primary motive is not to see how one can profit from the relationship, but to love and care for the other person.

²⁴ To illustrate, if the Christian were to discuss his ultimate commitment to his non-Christian friend, the latter must offer a disinterested, patronizing, or even hostile reaction. If the friend reacts in a *sincerely* agreeable way, as if he shares this ultimate commitment, then he is already a Christian. Now if two people can never agree on the ultimate level, then no matter how socially compatible they appear to be, to define this as a deep friendship only betrays the shallowness of the one who calls it such.

²⁵ See also the ESV, REB, NRSV, NCV, and CCNT (Jay Adams).

²⁶ See also the HCSB, and The New Jerusalem Bible.

²⁷ There are other less serious contenders. See the GNT, NLT, and The Jerusalem Bible.

All three options are consistent with biblical teaching, and none does violence to the context, so the concern is not whether Scripture teaches any of these, but with what Scripture teaches *here*. Among others, I suggest *Keil & Delitzsch* and Bruce Waltke's commentary if you are interested in the grammatical considerations. I favor the second option, as represented by the NIV, ESV, and others.

As for the first part of the verse, translations other than the typical one had been suggested, but they were rather implausible. Precise considerations regarding the second part aside, the first part is clear and defines the intention of verses 4 and 5: "Do not wear yourself out to get rich."²⁸

To review, let us paraphrase what we have learned so far (22:29-23:5): "If you are competent and efficient in your work, you will not remain among obscure men, but you will be taken into the presence of kings and rulers. Now, when you dine with one of these important individuals, you must restrain your appetite if you are prone to indulge. This is because the feast is probably not just a simple gesture of hospitality, but the host might have ulterior motive in mind. He is watching you, testing you, and you should take care lest you offend him, or do something to entrap yourself, or to incite his contempt. Nevertheless, no matter how careful or discreet you are, wealth is fleeting. Take a mere glance at it, and it flies away. And because wealth is so unreliable, do not overwork yourself to obtain it, but have the sense to stop."

We now have more than enough context and background to understand verses 6-8. These verses convey several ideas that overlap with the previous verses, but they also make some unique contributions in teaching us about human nature and how to deal with people.

Verse 6 literally refers to one who has an "evil eye" (KJV). Most people who have heard of this term would associate it with a later usage, which refers to the magical power to harm or curse others with a glance or glare. But this is not the biblical meaning.

When it comes to expressions such as "an evil eye," "an eye that is evil," "a good eye," "a bountiful eye," and so forth, many modern translations put down the interpretations instead of the actual words of the text. And since "the evil eye" and other related terms might mean slightly different things in different contexts, they are often rendered differently even within the same translation, making it impossible to perform a simple cross-reference study of the various verses that use these expressions. On the other hand, the KJV seems to be more literal and consistent when translating "the evil eye" and related terms.

Our first example comes from Deuteronomy 15:7-11. In the KJV, we read as follows:

²⁸ Since I have already addressed this elsewhere in detail, I will refrain from repeating everything here. Instead, please see "Kingdom First" in my *Doctrine and Obedience* and "Godliness with Contentment" in my *Godliness with Contentment*.

If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth. Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and *thine eye be evil* against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

The context makes it clear that the expression "thine eye be evil" (v. 9) means to "harden thine heart," "shut thine hand," and "givest him nought." The opposite of this is to "open thine hand," "lend him sufficient for his need," and "shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him." The NASB translates, "...and your eye is *hostile* toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing."

In describing a people under God's curse, Deuteronomy 28:54-56 says:

So that the man that is tender among you, and very delicate, *his eye shall be evil* toward his brother, and toward the wife of his bosom, and toward the remnant of his children which he shall leave: So that he will not give to any of them of the flesh of his children whom he shall eat: because he hath nothing left him in the siege, and in the straitness, wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee in all thy gates. The tender and delicate woman among you, which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness and tenderness, *her eye shall be evil* toward the husband of her bosom, and toward her son, and toward her daughter... (KJV)

"His eye shall be evil" means that this person who is eating the flesh of his own children would refuse to share it with the rest of his family. The NIV renders the expression "will have no compassion" (v. 54) and "will begrudge" (v. 56).

Then, "is thine eye evil" (KJV) in Matthew 20:15 is translated "are you envious" in the NIV. The workers who started at the beginning begrudge the fact that those who came later are given the same wages. Similarly, "an evil eye" (KJV) in Mark 7:22 is rendered "envy" in the NIV. In contrast, one who has "a bountiful eye" is one who "giveth of his bread to the poor" (Proverbs 22:9, KJV). He is "a generous man" (NIV).

So to think that one with an evil eye is "a stingy man" in Proverbs 23:7 is not wrong, but perhaps it is too weak and incomplete in that it fails to fully convey what kind of man we

are talking about. This is not just a penny pincher, but a hard and mean person – stinginess is probably just one symptom of his rotten spirit.

When dealing with such a person, Scripture says, do not *eat* or *crave* what he offers you. This is because he is not the person that he presents himself to be – he is not as he appears, but "as he *thinks within* himself, so he is" (NIV, margin).

Now we have finally arrived at 23:7. It should be obvious by now that the verse is not teaching positive thinking, or that man has some mysterious power to transform or enrich himself by the power of his mind. The verse is talking about something entirely different. It is teaching about shrewd social behavior in the light of the truth about human nature.

The NIV translates one with an evil eye as "a stingy man" in verse 6, and consistent with this, it renders verse 7 as, "for he is the kind of man who is always thinking *about the cost*." But this might be slightly too interpretive, even though "think" here can mean "calculate." The ESV has "for he is like one who is inwardly calculating," and in the margin, "for as he calculates in his soul, so is he."

As the second portion of verse 7 explains, you must not accept what one with an evil eye offers because, although he urges you to eat and drink, "his heart is not with you." He is not just being hospitable, but he has an ulterior motive. He is trying to give you one impression, when in reality he has something else in mind. He is not the kind of person that he appears to be, but his true self is indicated by what goes on in his thinking, and the way he calculates costs and benefits in everything he does.

The passage is teaching you to distinguish between appearance and reality in human interactions. Things are not always as they seem, and people are not always as they appear. So if there is any indication at all that the person is a hard, mean, ambitious, and calculating person, beware, and avoid partaking of the things that he offers you. If you eat his food, accept his gifts, and hear his flatteries, you will be in his debt, and then you are trapped.

But more than this, verse 6 says, "do not *crave* his delicacies." When you covet something that another person offers, you can be baited, trapped, and manipulated. When you covet something, you are more likely to compromise your moral principles to obtain it, or to otherwise act against your better judgment. Therefore, when encountering one with an evil eye, we must not only control our actions, but also rein in our desires.

To ignore this biblical admonition would be to set yourself up for a great disappointment. When the person's true nature and purpose are exposed, all the delicacies you accepted from him and all the pleasantries you exchanged with him would now seem revolting to you. What you thought was a generous act of hospitality was nothing but a show, aimed to profit from you or manipulate you in some way. You were foolish enough to play his game, and now you are left with regret and disgust.

But verse 8 would apply even if the person is simply insincere,²⁹ and even if he has no immediate plan to use you or profit from you.

Once my parents took me to a semi-formal New Year's Eve party. I was still attending junior high school at the time – a boarding school – and I was home for Christmas vacation, which would end at the beginning of January.

As I always felt during these occasions, the party was boring, and the conversation superficial. I did not want to be there, and there was no place to hide and read. But the food was fantastic! Now, if they would leave me alone and let me concentrate on the buffet...

Alas! This woman, who appeared to be walking toward somewhere or someone else, suddenly stopped next to me, threw me a big smile, and asked, "Aren't you so-and-so's son?" I nodded, skillfully and imperceptibly swallowing the slice of smoked salmon that I had just placed in my mouth.

We exchanged some meaningless pleasantries that were forgotten almost immediately after they were said. She then started to ask me several questions about my life at school, but all the while her eyes were roaming all over the large room, but mostly scanning at the area behind me.

For several minutes, she kept up an apparent interest in our conversation. Just when I thought she must have had enough of this, she asked a very specific question about the curriculum at my school. I understood that she was pulling a "Dale Carnegie"³⁰ on me, but he would have told her to make eye contact.

I was in the middle of my answer – in the middle of a sentence – when her eyes, still wandering, suddenly brightened up and focused. She threw up her arms and called out someone's name, and without even looking back at me or excusing herself, walked straight toward the direction that she was looking at, as if we were not having a conversation at all.

If you think that I was disgusted, you are right. The salmon showed me more respect than she did. I was not surprised or hurt, because long before then I had learned from the Bible that people are often insincere. But still, I was repulsed by the fact that I had entertained her hypocrisy in the first place (v. 8).

As far as I could tell, she was not malicious, and she probably did not even realize that she had walked away from someone in the middle of a conversation. Nevertheless, her action exposed the type of person that she was. She could smile and feign interest, but her

²⁹ See John Gill, *Exposition of the Old & New Testaments, Vol. 4* (Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), p. 486.

³⁰ See Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*. I had already read all of Carnegie's books by that time. Although I would barely permit one to read his *How to Develop Self-Confidence and Influence People by Public Speaking*, I would not recommend the rest for the Christian. See "Ungodly Counsel" in my *Renewing the Mind*.

real self consisted in the thoughts and dispositions of her heart, and not the outward impression that she tried so hard to create.

We have reached the end of our passage, and I promised to revisit the question of cynicism, adding to what I have already said about it.

Our passage warns that people can be selfish, insincere, hard, mean, calculating, and manipulative. Now, we are supposed to believe this and teach it to our children, as the Book of Proverbs is teaching all of us. But some people might worry if this would generate a cynical outlook.

Merriam-Webster defines "cynical" as "contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives." If cynicism must be contemptuous by definition, then perhaps this is not the best word to describe the biblical attitude. Nevertheless, knowing the doctrine of human depravity, we must at least be "distrustful of human nature and motives."

The resistance that many believers show toward this teaching indicates how much they have been influenced by humanistic thinking, which teaches that human beings are essentially good, and that we bring out the best in people by trusting them.

Scripture declares that human beings are essentially evil, at least until God sovereignly changes them, and even then they are still capable of great wickedness. Experience proves nothing, since examples in support of one view is always easily neutralized by just as many counterexamples. But if we care about experience at all, there is an abundance of examples illustrating how we often invite people to do their *worst* to us when we trust them.

Yet the Bible does not teach cynicism – in the sense of a bitter and hopeless pessimism, or an attitude that imposes a sour and sarcastic interpretation on everything. But along with the reality of sin, it teaches us to develop and exercise wisdom, discernment, shrewdness, and discretion.

In fact, the only rational prevention for cynicism is God's revelation to us concerning sin and salvation. Those children who are being taught that all human beings are essentially good, and that a trusting and affirming attitude can draw the good out of them, are being prepared for the shock of their lives. They are being taught something that is simply not true, and when they are inevitably forced to face the depths of human wickedness in the future – whether in the form of hate and harassment, greed and deception, or rape and murder – they will be left without the proper framework by which to interpret what they experience.

This is the very worst way to learn anything, partly because one cannot learn anything at all in this manner.³¹ Without revealed truth to structure and control their thinking, they will make the wrong generalizations about human nature and society, and they will produce sinful and destructive emotional reactions. Many would turn to blame God, and

³¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word and Prayer and Revelation*.

charge *him* with evil and injustice. Multitudes have developed an intense hatred of God just because people have done to them whatever Scripture says they would, but what their parents and teachers said not to expect.

On the other hand, someone who has been taught all the biblical precepts and doctrines regarding the depravity of man would not at all be surprised when things that are thoroughly consistent with what he has been taught occur. Whereas experience does not teach a person how to react, whether spiritually, emotionally, or socially, Scripture offers complete information on both what to expect from people and how to react when they behave exactly as expected.

In addition, the biblical doctrine of human depravity does not only teach that *other people* are sinful, wicked, and dishonest, but that *we* are this way as well. This and other related biblical teachings help to stem pride and bitterness from taking root in the believer's heart.

More than that, the Christian is also taught the solution for human depravity, that is, God's sovereign work through Christ and by the Spirit to justify and transform the sinner. An understanding of the extent of human depravity motivates him to cling to Christ that much more, and to earnestly hold forth the word of life to this crooked generation. Thus the informed Christian is taught not only to expect evil from people, but also to protect himself from this evil, to pity and forgive those who wrong him, and to preach Christ as the only hope.

Therefore, when the whole biblical worldview is taught – human depravity as well as how God addresses it – there is no inherent danger that one would develop a false or destructive kind of pessimism. A person with the right kind of pessimism toward man is not easily swayed by treachery and scandals, as many believers are swayed, but he fully expects them, and he expects them often. But he is never driven to cynicism or despair, because he also knows the Lord who is always true and always reliable, and it is only upon him that he trusts and depends.