

The Sermon *on the* Mount

Vincent Cheung

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PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA

<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

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PREFACE

For me, preparing for a book project usually involves extensive study in academic materials relevant to the topic at hand. Therefore, although I intended to write only an introductory exposition on the Sermon on the Mount, my preparation included a prolonged period of immersion in the biblical text and the relevant literature. Completely preoccupied with the Sermon, I was constantly reading about it, thinking about it, and praying about it.

Since I was dealing with the Sermon on the Mount as a Christian, and since I understood that Scripture is the very word of God and the very voice of God, I dared not approach the Sermon with a detached indifference; rather, the words of Christ penetrated my very thoughts and motives, exposing my own failures and shortcomings, and reminding me of my constant dependence on the Father's mercy, Christ's sacrifice, and the Spirit's power for my justification and sanctification before God. Just as it is by God's grace alone that I was converted, it is by God's power alone that I am working out my salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), so that there is no room for boasting.

Although I had accumulated much information on the Sermon, it was necessary to exclude most of the details from this book so that I could maintain a structured and flowing text. In a way, this is regrettable because I would like my readers to learn as much as possible about the Sermon, or for that matter, any theological topic or biblical passage. Nevertheless, a single book cannot satisfy every purpose, and as a "first look" on the Sermon on the Mount, what I have written here should be adequate.

1. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

THE KING (Matthew 4:23-25)

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

From the very beginning of Matthew's Gospel, one main emphasis is to show that Jesus fulfills the biblical promises and predictions, that what the covenant community has been expecting throughout the centuries has now appeared in this person, and that just as John the Baptist has come to announce the kingdom of heaven and its king, Jesus has come to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven *as its king*. The content of the Sermon on the Mount both reflects and reinforces this emphasis. For our purpose, we will take only a quick glance at the passages immediately preceding the Sermon, to see that the ministry and message of Christ fit into such a context, and lead up to the Sermon itself.

First, Matthew shows that Jesus fulfills the requirements of the law. When John the Baptist hesitates to baptize Jesus in Matthew 3:14, Jesus does not deny that he is different from all the others who come to John for baptism, but he says, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15).¹ After his baptism, Jesus completes a forty-day fast in the desert, and overcomes several temptations from the devil (4:1-11). In such a manner, Christ demonstrates perfect ceremonial and moral obedience to God's law.

Christ's work of redemption does not include only his voluntary acceptance of extreme suffering (Philippians 2:8), which theologians call his passive obedience; rather, to redeem God's elect, Christ has to excel where Adam failed, so that he has to demonstrate perfect active obedience to God's laws and precepts as well. Paul explains, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). As a Jew "born under law" (Galatians 4:4), Jesus identifies with God's covenant people by

¹ Jesus is probably going through the final steps in becoming a priest of God as defined by the law. Under the law, it seems that a priest begins his ministry at the age of thirty (Numbers 4:3, 47), and so Jesus begins his ministry at this age (Luke 3:23). Among other things, the law also requires a priest to be sprinkled with water by one who is already a priest (Numbers 8:6-7), and thus as Jesus begins his ministry, he comes to John (who has inherited his priesthood from his father) to be baptized. Jesus is not a Levite, and his priesthood is not under the order of Aaron, but the order of Melchizedek; that is, he is a priest by divine appointment, not by human heritage. (See Jay E. Adams, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975; p. 16-20.)

submitting under the law; however, unlike everyone else, he perfectly fulfills the requirements of the law. Jesus demonstrates perfect active obedience and perfect passive obedience, so that God is perfectly pleased with him: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Second, Matthew shows that Jesus fulfills the predictions of the prophets. Everything that the prophets said about the characteristics of and the circumstances around the Messiah is fulfilled in Jesus (4:12-16). Since the very beginning of his Gospel, Matthew gives numerous examples of how Jesus fulfills these prophecies. Then, since the predicted Messiah would be "the king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) with his own heavenly kingdom (John 18:36), and since Jesus fulfills all the prophecies about this predicted Messiah, this means that Jesus is the Messiah, and that he is the king.

Just as John the Baptist came as a herald to announce the coming of the king and his kingdom, Jesus has come as this king to announce the coming of his kingdom. Therefore, Jesus often speaks of "the kingdom of heaven" (4:17), and he preaches "the good news of the kingdom" (v. 23). He chooses and calls people to follow him and to become his subjects. One main purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to explain the characteristics of those who belong to his kingdom (5:3, 10).

The "kingdom of heaven" and the "kingdom of God" are synonymous. For example, whereas Matthew 4:17 says, "Repent, for the *kingdom of heaven* is near," the parallel verse in Mark 1 says, "The *kingdom of God* is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (v. 15). And where Matthew 8:11 says, "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the *kingdom of heaven*," Luke 13:28 says, "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the *kingdom of God*, but you yourselves thrown out."

Within the Gospel of Matthew, the two terms are used interchangeably in 19:23-24: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of heaven*. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of God*.'" The terms are also used interchangeably in the parallel accounts of the Sermon on the Mount itself, so that where Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the *kingdom of heaven*" (5:3), Luke says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the *kingdom of God*" (6:20).²

The "kingdom" carries the idea of a territory over which a king rules. Since God rules over everything through Christ (Matthew 28:18), in this very broad sense, the kingdom of God is universal. However, Scripture often uses the term in a narrower sense. The Sermon itself indicates that the kingdom of heaven does not include everyone. For example, the Beatitudes (5:3-10) specify the characteristics of those to whom belong the kingdom of heaven, implying that those who do not possess these characteristics will not be given the kingdom. Then, 7:21 shows that not all those who think that they will enter

² Other examples include: Matthew 13:11 and Mark 4:11; Matthew 13:31 and Mark 4:30; Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20; Matthew 18:3 and Mark 10:15; Matthew 19:14 and Mark 10:14.

the kingdom of heaven will indeed enter. In fact, this group includes "many" people, indicating that "many" are excluded from the kingdom.

Other biblical passages not only reinforce the idea that the kingdom of heaven excludes many people, but they also clarify what kind of people it includes, and what it means to "enter the kingdom." For example, Matthew 18:8 contrasts "enter life" with "be thrown into eternal fire." Mark 9:43 and 45 likewise contrast "enter life" with "go into hell" and "be thrown into hell." In other words, entering life is the opposite of entering hell. Then, in verse 47, Scripture makes the same contrast, but interchanges "enter life" with "enter the kingdom of God." In Matthew 19:16 and 23, it appears that "to get eternal life" and "to enter the kingdom of heaven" are interchangeable. Jesus says in John 3:3 and 3:5 that unless a person is "born again," he can neither "see" nor "enter" the kingdom of God. Therefore, when Jesus lists the characteristics of those to whom belong the kingdom of heaven, he is listing the characteristics of "born again" people, so that there appears to be a salvific relationship between the king and his subjects.

Theologians often refer to the "already" and the "not yet" aspects of the kingdom. By this they mean that although the kingdom has already come in Jesus Christ, its full manifestation remains in the future. As Hebrews 2:8 says, "In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him." Therefore, although Jesus says that "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28), he also teaches his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come" (6:10), as they continue to look for "his appearing and his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1).³

As Jesus carries out his ministry, he preaches the "good news of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). This preaching ministry would continue through the apostles, so that Paul also describes his own work as "preaching the kingdom" (Acts 20:25), declaring the presence and authority of the heavenly kingdom and its king, and calling people to submit and become its subjects.

As Jesus preaches this message of the kingdom and as he performs many miracles of healing, large crowds of people begin to follow him. However, regarding many worshipers, God has said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8); likewise, many of those who appear to follow Jesus are not really sincere disciples or true worshipers. Jesus would warn his hearers about this soon enough, but first he begins the Sermon by describing those who would enter the kingdom of heaven.

³ It seems that the kingdom also has a close relationship to the covenant community, so that when Jesus talks about building his "church," he also refers to the "keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:18-19). This explains how some of "the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside" (Matthew 8:12); that is, although the Jews were the natural members of the kingdom, being born into God's covenant community, because of their unbelief, they were thrown outside, and God took the kingdom away from them and gave it to the Gentiles (Matthew 21:43).

HIS SERVANTS (Matthew 5:1-12)

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

As large crowds of people begin to gather around Jesus, he goes up on a mountainside and sits down. Some commentators see important parallels between this and how Moses delivered God's law at Mount Sinai, but it is difficult and inappropriate to make much out of this.

Nevertheless, verses 1 and 2 are by no means useless – they tell us that Jesus sits down to assume the traditional position of the teacher in a synagogue or school, and where the NIV has "he began to teach them," more literal translations read, "he opened his mouth, and taught them" (KJV) or "opening His mouth, He began to teach them" (NASB) – a Jewish idiom emphasizing the authority and solemnity of the discourse to follow.

Thus the Sermon begins with Jesus assuming a position of authority, and ends with the audience being amazed at his authority: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (7:28-29).

There are some indications of logical progressions and divisions within the Sermon. Based on the content of the Sermon, our exposition will be divided into three large sections: Matthew 5:1-16, in which Jesus, the king of the kingdom of heaven, appears to describe the characteristics of those who are subjects of his kingdom; Matthew 5:17-7:12,

in which Jesus declares the true interpretations and implications of the law, and the law's relationship to his subjects; and Matthew 7:13-27, in which Jesus distinguishes between his true and false followers.

These divisions are confirmed by Jesus' use of the rhetorical device of "inclusio," where the same words or expressions are used at the beginning and end of each section, so that "the kingdom of heaven" brackets the section that we have come to call the Beatitudes, and "the Law and the Prophets" brackets the larger second section. Of course, at least one of the Sermon's main themes is "the kingdom of heaven," since the term appears prominently in each of the three sections.

The Beatitudes (5:3-10) is called such because in it Jesus begins each statement with a blessing, and "beatitude" is derived from the Latin *beatus*, meaning "blessed." The Greek word translated "blessed" is *makarios*, rendered as "happy" in some translations. "Happy" can be misleading because although it is often understood as a description of one's subjective state, *makarios* refers to a person's objective state, and thus "happy" is acceptable only if one understands it in the objective sense, as in one's "happy condition." As John Stott explains, "He is declaring not what they may feel like..., but what God thinks of them...."⁴ R. T. France suggests less ambiguous renderings such as "fortunate" and "well off."⁵

Since the beatitudes describe the objective qualities and privileges of the true followers of Christ, their thrust is not "Do X, and you will get Y," but rather, "Those who have the spiritual quality X are fortunate and well off, because they have or will have Y." As R. T. France explains, "The beatitudes thus outline the attitudes of the true disciples, the one who has accepted the demands of God's kingdom, in contrast with the attitudes of the 'man of the world'; and they present this as the best way of life not only in its intrinsic goodness but in its results."⁶

"Blessed are the poor in spirit..." (v. 3)

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the "poor" – not those who are poor in material things, but those who are "poor *in spirit*." Since those who are poor in material things are often very conscious of their total dependence on God for their necessities, and since some of the Hebrew words for "poor" can also mean "lowly" and "humble," the "poor" has come to be closely associated with those who look to God in reverence and humility, with a contrite and repentant heart (Psalms 40:17, 69:32-33; Isaiah 41:17, 57:15, 61:1).

Because the "poor" is so identified with those who are not only in need of God's help, but with those who *acknowledge* that they are in need of God's help, the "poor in spirit" does not refer only to those who are spiritually destitute, which would include everyone, but it

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*; InterVarsity Press, 1978; p. 33.

⁵ R. T. France, *Matthew* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries); William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985; p. 108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

also refers to those who *acknowledge* that they are spiritually destitute, and thus those who cry out to God for help and mercy. D. A. Carson writes:

Poverty of spirit is the personal acknowledgment of spiritual bankruptcy. It is the conscious confession of unworth before God. As such, it is the deepest form of repentance...From within such a framework, poverty of spirit becomes a general confession of a man's need for God, a humble admission of impotence without him.⁷

Jesus is talking about those who have an acute awareness of their spiritual need, but more than that, they are those who exercise conscious dependence on and confidence in God to meet that need. To *these* people belong the kingdom of heaven.

Since the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, and since the poor in spirit are those who acknowledge that they have nothing within themselves by which they may commend themselves to God for his approval, this beatitude excludes salvation by works, and is consistent only with justification by faith. The poor in spirit are those who know and admit their depravity, and plead God for his mercy, knowing that in themselves, there is no hope for gaining God's approval. Their confidence is only in God and not in themselves.

This is contrary to what non-Christians think. In one way or another, non-Christians have confidence in their own goodness and sufficiency. They acknowledge neither God's holiness nor man's depravity; rather, they think that God's standard is relatively low, and that man's nature is essentially good. Some people even claim to have been Christians for many years, although they have never acknowledged their comprehensive sinfulness. Others talk about man's depravity, but they become offended if you apply the concept to them; they are willing to acknowledge that all men are sinful, as long as no one points out that this includes them. For still others, the most that they are willing to admit when it comes to man's depravity is that "nobody's perfect." All of these people have not even started to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Many hardened and unrepentant sinners today think that Jesus is on their side. Does not Jesus save even murderers and prostitutes, as the Scripture teaches? Of course he does, but what kind of murderers and prostitutes does he save? He does not save the murderers and prostitutes who insist on remaining murderers and prostitutes, but he saves only those who, by the sovereign grace of God, acknowledge their sinfulness and resolve to stop being murderers and prostitutes. He does not save murderers who think that it is morally right to murder, and he does not save the prostitutes who think that they are full of merit. Instead, he saves only those who are "poor in spirit" – those who know that they have nothing, and plead for his mercy.

Of course, many of those who appeal to Jesus' gracious treatment of sinners have no interest in becoming Christians, but they only say what they say to silence the Christians

⁷ D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount*; Global Christian Publishers, 1999; p. 18.

who tell them to repent. But they are nothing like the sinners that Jesus accepts in Scripture. For example, today's homosexuals do not appeal to God's mercy to forgive them of the sin of homosexuality, to regenerate them and deliver them from their perverse lifestyle. Rather, they claim that God accepts them as homosexuals, that God approves of their lifestyle, that homosexuality is not at all sinful, and they demand that Christians honor their deviant desires and relationships as good and legitimate. As Paul writes, "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" (Romans 1:32). All of these people are far from the kingdom of heaven, but are on their way to endless suffering in hell.

The people that Jesus describes in the Beatitudes are very different from the people of this world. The two groups are as different as light is to darkness, as the kingdom of heaven is to the kingdom of hell, and as Christ is to Satan. Instead of calling all of humanity to become one, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not be like them" (Matthew 6:8). Just as it is stupid and dangerous to imitate the thinking and the behavior of the insane, it is more stupid and dangerous to imitate the thinking and the behavior of non-Christians. There is nothing admirable about them; there is nothing good about them. Every non-Christian is filthy and despicable, just as we were filthy and despicable before God sovereignly converted us.

So Jesus does not call his church to think and behave like the world. As Stott writes, "There is no single paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount in which this contrast between Christian and non-Christian standards is not drawn. It is the underlying and uniting theme of the Sermon; everything else is a variation of it."⁸ Rather, Jesus calls his church to be the "counter-culture"⁹ – to use all the biblically approved means to distinguish ourselves from non-Christians, to oppose their agenda, and to tear down their unscriptural culture (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

In our teaching and evangelism, on the one hand, we should encourage poverty of spirit, the awareness and acknowledgement of spiritual destitution apart from God's mercy and riches; on the other hand, we should subvert non-Christian thinking and behavior. And when we preach the gospel, we should consciously defy unbiblical moral standards, social etiquettes, and psychological theories.

Nowadays, many professing believers approach sinners with a self-centered gospel. They tell them, "God has a great plan for your life," "You are someone special," "You are valuable to God," and even "God needs you." One would think that these professing Christians are "head-hunters" for God's corporation, although the biblical picture of our evangelistic outreach is more like picking up trash and refuse from the side of the road so that God may transform them into useful objects by his sovereign mercy and power. Paul writes that the unconverted are "worthless," that not one of them does good, "not even one" (Romans 3:12). Thus, whereas Onesimus was "useless" before his conversion, he had become "useful" after he was converted (Philemon 11).

⁸ Stott, p. 19.

⁹ Ibid., p. 15-19.

Accordingly, the biblical preachers do not herald a message of self-esteem and self-sufficiency, but a message of urgent repentance. Both John and Jesus tell people, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). Likewise, Peter preaches, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (Acts 3:19), and Paul declares to the philosophers, "Now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

One of the most foolish harmful myths today is that Jesus teaches tolerance toward various religions and lifestyles. But the fact that Jesus tells his hearers to "repent" means that there is *something wrong* with them, and that he does not hesitate to tell them that there is something wrong with them. Of course Jesus associates with sinners and outcasts, but he never preaches a message of "I accept you as you are – don't ever change." Rather, he comes to them with a message that says, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14), and "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

In reality, Jesus is the least tolerant person of all. Because of our own sinfulness, we will often excuse some of the sins in ourselves and in others, or at least view them with some leniency. As for Jesus, he says, "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 many thousands of careless words have you spoken *this week*, let alone in your lifetime? If non-Christians consider *this* Jesus tolerant, then for sure Christians are already tolerant enough. But the church is to be a "counter-culture," so that rather than conforming to the world's standard of morality and propriety, we are to imitate Christ's intolerance.

In a day when even supposedly knowledgeable biblical scholars scramble to argue that Christianity is tolerant, I have no interest in doing the same – the Bible never teaches tolerance as defined by the non-Christians. On the contrary, Scripture demands that we imitate Christ's intolerance against sin, unbelief, and false religions, and use all the biblically approved means to oppose, undermine, belittle, and destroy all unbiblical ideas and agendas.

People are horrified at such a teaching, and the less intelligent have suggested to me that this is the same type of thinking that leads to Islamic terrorism. To this, we may offer at least two replies.

First, this is an irrational objection. Even if belief X leads to an undesirable Y (that is, undesirable according to the one making the objection, such as terrorism), it does not follow that belief X is automatically false. The objection assumes that any belief that leads to terrorism must be false – but according to whom? Rather, proper reasoning must affirm that *if* Islam is true (that is, if it is truly a revelation from God), and if it leads to terrorism, then terrorism must be good, right, and justified.

Although Islam indeed promotes terrorism, it would be irrational to reject Islam for this reason. Rather, I reject Islam because it is a false religion, and because it is a false religion, it cannot justify terrorism as good and right. It is not that Islam is wrong because

terrorism is wrong; instead, terrorism is wrong because Islam is wrong. Many people judge whether something is true by whether they think the result is good, but this reverses the proper order of reasoning – they should judge whether the result is good by whether what leads to it is true.

Second, I did not say that we should use all possible or available means to promote Christianity; rather, I stated that we should use all *biblically approved* means to advance the gospel and undermine unbelief. This effectively excludes violence and terrorism as legitimate ways to further the Christian cause, for as Paul writes:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Biblical intolerance produces spiritual vigilance and intellectual aggression in the believers, and not violence or terrorism. To advance the kingdom of Christ and to demolish the kingdom of Satan, we use biblically approved means and divinely empowered methods, not guns and bombs. Thus whereas Christian intolerance promotes truth and righteousness, Islamic intolerance produces terror and destruction. Our gospel has the spiritual power to do what no physical weapon can do – to genuinely change people's hearts and minds. Islam is impotent to do the same, so that it must resort to beastly means, but even then, it can only change one kind of sinners into another kind of sinners, both doomed to hell.

The truth is that those who advocate tolerance are often intolerant. Their definition of tolerance permits only what they arbitrarily consider as tolerable, so that they in fact do not respect all opinions, but despise what *they consider* intolerant and hateful ideas. Whereas I freely admit that I despise all non-Christian ideas and refuse to pretend that I respect all opinions, they also do not respect all opinions, but the difference is that they lie about it, and pretend to be tolerant people.

Returning to our initial point, our message must not conform to unbiblical views about human nature, but instead we must tell our hearers, "There is indeed something wrong with you, and you must turn from your sins and come to Christ for salvation. Otherwise, there is no hope for you, and you will suffer endless torment in hell." Even many professing Christians have lost the "poverty of spirit," so that they say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing," to which Christ replies, "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). What, then, is the solution? You must come to Christ, so that he may give you true riches, true covering, and true wisdom (v. 18); that is, you must "repent" (v. 19). Until then, you are probably still outside of the kingdom of heaven, even if you have settled into the church on earth.

"Blessed are those who mourn..." (v. 4)

Since a person cannot come to Christ unless the Father first changes his heart, one who is poor in spirit is also one whose heart God has already softened; therefore, one who acknowledges his sinfulness and helplessness before God naturally mourns his depraved condition (5:4). This mourning is neither a general sadness nor an emotional upheaval, but it is a strong mental grief and repulsion resulting from the realization of our own wickedness. The righteous man does not wallow in carnal and self-centered depression, but he laments his sins because he cares about what God thinks, and now that he has started to see sin as it is, he is also learning how his wickedness offends this holy God.

A person may regret his sinful deed because he has been caught, although he does not really identify with the biblical condemnation against it. Then, a person may be following an unbiblical religion or philosophy, and grieves over his failure to excel in this non-Christian system. God will not comfort these false mourners, because Christ is referring to a kind of sorrow that comes from true repentance and humility, and not the kind that comes from false piety and personal frustrations. In other words, this is godly sorrow and not worldly sorrow: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). As Paul exclaims, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

The righteous man – one whom God has convinced, convicted, and converted – does not mourn only about his own sins, but also the sins of others, especially those within the covenant community, or the church. When God reveals his holiness to Isaiah, the prophet is so overwhelmed that he cries, "Woe is me!...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5). He bewails not only his own sinfulness, but also the sinfulness of those around him.

Likewise, Jeremiah mourns extensively about the sins of his people in the Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, and in accordance with his prophecies, God expelled the people from their land. Later, when Daniel addresses God concerning the promise of the people's return, also spoken through Jeremiah, he again mourns over the sins of his people: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws" (Daniel 9:4-5). Then, he also mourns about the corresponding punishments that his people received because of their sins (v. 11-14).

Within the context of the Sermon on the Mount in general and the Beatitudes in particular, Jesus probably also includes the mourning by believers produced by the oppression and persecution coming from unbelievers (5:10-12). Jesus says that those who mourn are "blessed" – not that the act of mourning in itself pleases God, but Jesus is referring to a type of people, and listing their characteristics. That is, he does not say, "Mourn so that you may be comforted," but rather, "Blessed are *those who* mourn – they

are blessed because they will receive divine comfort." Because this world hates God and his servants (Luke 21:17; John 15:18-19), it will often oppress and persecute those who preach and practice God's precepts, causing much suffering for God's people, who mourn under such pressure and trust God for comfort and deliverance. This mourning can be about a whole range of things, from ungodly social trends to outright government-sponsored persecution against Christianity.

Jesus is again promoting counter-cultural thinking. Just as many spiritually destitute people think that they are spiritually rich, instead of mourning over their sinfulness, many people are proud of their sins. White-collar criminals boast about taking advantage of legal loopholes for their own profit, street thugs boast about their toughness and gang affiliations, adulterers and fornicators boast about their sexual escapades, and instead of being ashamed and afraid, homosexuals are "proud to be gay."

They have no fear of God. If they talk about God at all, they often think that God approves of what they are doing. Or, sometimes they glibly say, "God will forgive me – that's his job." However, Scripture never teaches that God is obligated to forgive everyone – or *anyone*, for that matter. He has decided to pardon only those whom he grants genuine repentance; other than that, his "job" is to condemn precisely these unrepentant and irreverent sinners to endless suffering in hell.

Not only do these people boast about their shameful deeds, but they approve of others who do the same (Romans 1:32), and encourage them to pursue their wicked ways. Even some who call themselves Christians applaud those who blatantly defy Scripture. To cite some recent examples, the members of a prominent evangelical society voted to retain certain theologians who hold heretical views regarding the inerrancy of Scripture and the nature of God, and several large denominations have gone as far as to ordain homosexuals to lead their people.

They are proud to be so "open-minded" to the devil, but Paul condemns this attitude: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?" (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). Instead of being proud of the unrepentant sinners among us, instead of being proud of ourselves for tolerating them, and instead of giving our approval to heretics, criminals, and deviants, we must confront them, and expel those who refuse to repent.

Yet only a small number of churches today confront and expel those who affirm open theism, reject biblical inerrancy, practice divination and necromancy, and those who commit abortion, adultery, fornication, sodomy, and blasphemy. Worse than that, the trend is to let these people govern and teach the believers in our churches. Whereas "God's righteous decree" is that "those who do such things deserve death," many professing Christians think that these people deserve to be promoted (Romans 1:32).

Just as the righteous and the unrighteous have very different attitudes toward sin, God has ordained very different destinies for them. God will pour out his wrath against those who tolerate sin in themselves and in others (Romans 1:18, 32). As Jesus says, "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25). Are you proud of doing something that Scripture condemns? You may be proud now, but soon God himself will humiliate you, and you may laugh now, but soon God himself will cause you to weep.

Some people insist that God mainly wants them to be happy, and this assumption has become for them a principle for guidance in decision-making. That is, since God wants them to be happy, then God's will must be for them to pursue the course of action that maximizes their happiness. Even some allegedly Christian ministers are sympathetic to such a view. This way of thinking is then used to justify their illegitimate marriages, divorces, homosexual relationships, covetous ambitions, and various unbiblical and unproductive social gatherings and relationships.

However, the Bible does not teach the pursuit of happiness as a principle of guidance; instead, it teaches the pursuit of holiness:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8)

Therefore, preachers should not tell people, "God wants you to be happy; therefore, you may do whatever you wish," but rather, "God wants you to be holy; therefore, you must do whatever he commands; otherwise, 'The Lord will punish.'" Those who ignore God's precepts to pursue happiness may laugh now, but Jesus promises that they will mourn and weep later.

On the other hand, those who mourn now will be comforted (Matthew 5:4). As Isaiah prophesied:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.... (Isaiah 61:1-3)

In Luke 4, Jesus reads from this passage and announces, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The only proper response to our sinfulness is deep mourning, and the only true comfort to our mourning is the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Thus when Isaiah cries, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5), the passage continues, "Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for'" (v. 6-7). And when Paul exclaims, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24), he immediately answers, "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v. 25).

Just as it is God's grace that convicts us of our sinfulness, it is God's grace that converts and comforts us. Some of the old hymns are so rich in Reformation theology that they put many of today's sermons to shame. The well-known "Amazing Grace" was written by John Newton, who having gone through quite a sinful and turbulent life, and then undergone what he called a "great deliverance," wrote, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved!" It is God's grace that first convinces us about human depravity and divine judgment, leading to fear and despair, before the same divine grace rescues us from this fear and despair through faith in Jesus Christ.

"Blessed are the meek..." (v. 5)

A person who recognizes his spiritual destitution and who mourns over his own sinfulness is also a meek person (Matthew 5:5). The word "meek" is sometimes translated "humble" or "gentle," so that the REB says, "Blessed are the gentle." However, meekness does not imply weakness. Since this beatitude is an allusion to Psalm 37, a reliable way for finding out what meekness means is to examine how the idea appears within the context of this Psalm.

Every verse in Psalm 37 makes such a relevant contribution to our understanding of meekness that I am tempted to reproduce the entire Psalm, but since it contains forty verses, I will restrict myself to the first several verses and other especially relevant ones. You can pick just about any stanza from this Psalm, and it will give you a good representation of what the attitude of meekness is like; nevertheless, I recommend that you read the entire Psalm for yourself.

Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;

do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. (Psalm 37:1-7)

These and other verses in this Psalm suggest that there are two very different and distinguishable people on the earth – the righteous and the wicked. The wicked have no respect for God or trust in him. Instead, they strive and scheme to get what they want, even if that means oppressing other people and violating God's laws (v. 14), and these wicked people will often obtain the material and political success that they desire.

The Psalm begins by telling the righteous not to worry about or be envious of these wicked people and their success, because no matter how much they achieve, their success is only superficial and temporary. Thus the Psalm tells the righteous not to imitate the wicked men – rather than striving and scheming as the wicked men do, the righteous must trust in God to fulfill their desires and uphold their cause (v. 4, 6). In the face of failure, difficulty, and oppression, they must "wait patiently" (v. 7) for God to act on their behalf, and to vindicate them.

It is in this context that we find verse 11, which says, "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace." Other verses provide us with additional information about the characteristics of "the meek" and the promises applicable to them. The righteous are those who "trust in the Lord and do good" (v. 3), "wait patiently for him" (v. 7), "turn from evil and do good" (v. 27), "wait for the Lord and keep his way" (v. 34), and "take refuge in him" (v. 40). The Psalm promises that God will bless, protect, favor, and vindicate these righteous people, and that God will give them an everlasting inheritance (v. 18); on the other hand, the wicked will be "cut off" (v. 38).

This is the context with which we understand the beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Accordingly, Thayer's Lexicon says the following:

Meekness toward God is that disposition of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting. In the Old Testament, the meek are those wholly relying on God rather than their own strength to defend them against injustice. Thus, meekness toward evil people means knowing God is permitting the injuries they inflict, that He is using them to purify His elect, and that He will deliver His elect in His time. Gentleness or meekness is the opposite to self-assertiveness and self-interest. It stems from trust in God's goodness and control over the situation. The gentle person is not occupied with self at all. This is a work of the Holy Spirit, not of the human will (Gal. 5:23).¹⁰

¹⁰ *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; Hendrickson Publishers.

Therefore, meekness has more to do with our faith and self-restraint resulting from our knowledge of God and our relationship with God than with an actual inability to do otherwise.

For example, when Abraham and Lot decided to separate, Abraham did not strive with Lot to get a better territory for himself, but he allowed Lot to make the first choice (Genesis 13:8-12). Later, Lot lost everything he had, but because Abraham trusted in God, he became even more wealthy and powerful.

Another example comes from the life of Moses. He had a sense that God had called him to deliver his people (Acts 7:25), but at the beginning he did not rely on God to fulfill this calling. Rather, he was so impetuous that he murdered an Egyptian who was mistreating one of his own people (7:24). After forty years in exile, much of the impetuosity had gone from him, and he even hesitated when God called him to return to Egypt. He was a changed man – rather than depending on his own strength, he repeatedly pleaded with God to be with him and his people, saying, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here" (Exodus 33:15), and "O Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes...then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance" (34:9). He was so changed that Scripture testifies, "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3, KJV). He was the meekest, but certainly not the weakest.

Jesus himself was our supreme example of meekness. He said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle [or "meek"] and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Although he was promised a kingdom, he overcame the temptation to obtain it by a painless but demonic method (Matthew 4:8-10), and he refused to seize it by human support or military might (John 6:15, 18:36). Rather, he gained God's approval through obedience, patience, and endurance. He rode into Jerusalem to die for his elect, fulfilling prophecy: "See, your king comes to you, gentle [or "meek"] and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matthew 21:5).¹¹

We are to follow the examples of these biblical characters. Paul instructs us to adorn our lives with meekness, among other things: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness [or "meekness"] and patience" (Colossians 3:12), and he lists it as a fruit of the Spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [or "meekness"] and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Because "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5), Peter writes, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (v. 6). This reinforces the exhortations in Psalm 37 against envying and imitating evil men, but instead to trust in God, patiently waiting for him to deliver and vindicate us "in due time."

¹¹ Also see my exposition of Philippians 2:5-11 in *Commentary on Philippians*.

The meek person possesses the rare spiritual strength to restrain the self and to rely on God; he is gentle with others because he does not need or care to strive and scheme so that he may seize that which satisfies his selfish desires. Rather, he submits the exercise of his abilities to God, and restrains himself from using unbiblical ways to get ahead in this world. He trusts God to promote him, so he does not try to step on others just to exalt himself.

As with other characteristics described in the Beatitudes, biblical meekness contradicts the way unbelievers think and behave. Some of them equate meekness with weakness, and so they explicitly reject and despise it. Although this betrays a misunderstanding of biblical meekness, even many professing Christians think the same way, so that for them, to be meek is to be weak. It is true that the meek person both restrains himself and submits to God, so that he tends to be less aggressive or assertive when it comes to protecting his own interests; however, because he has dedicated himself to serve God, he can be very aggressive and assertive when it comes to defending God's cause and God's truth.

The meek person does not restrain himself because he is timid, but because he trusts in God to vindicate and promote him. In fact, the righteous are more courageous than the wicked because he is confident and secure in God: "The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion" (Proverbs 28:1). He is bold to assert God's rule and to proclaim God's word. This is not true with the wicked – all he has is himself, and all he lives for is himself, and so he exerts all his efforts and even sells his soul, but whatever he gains is insufficient and fleeting.

Then, other unbelievers do not explicitly reject and despise biblical meekness, but they produce a false version of it in their own lives. That is, they act out in their own lives one or more distortions and misconceptions of biblical meekness, and then falsely believe that they have developed character or even spirituality.

They may have the idea that biblical meekness involves constant self-degradation, but Scripture calls for an accurate view of oneself. Romans 12:3 says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Of course, the problem is often an overly exalted view of oneself, and thus Paul warns of it here. But in this same verse he assumes that there is a view of yourself that you "ought" to have, and that is in accordance with "sober judgment" and "the measure of faith God has given you." Meekness indeed implies some level of self-effacement (Mark 12:38-40; Luke 14:7-11), but not in a forced or insincere manner, and not to the point of being repugnant or obnoxious. There is often little difference between one person's false meekness than another person's arrogance and dishonesty.

In any case, non-Christian worldviews cannot provide the intellectual foundation for true biblical meekness. Since non-Christians do not affirm or worship God as he has revealed himself in Scripture, they cannot then trust in this God to favor or to vindicate them. In

their view, there is no divine providence that works out all things for the good of the righteous. Since they do not affirm the afterlife as revealed in Scripture, they can focus only on this life, and their priorities pertain only to this life. Since there is no final judgment, there is little to prevent them from striving and scheming, even at the expense of others, to attain what they consider success in this world. Of course, even if they get what they want, since death is final for them, everything is ultimately futile. As Jesus says, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

On the other hand, although God's moral precepts sometimes render believers "as sheep to be slaughtered" (Romans 8:36), because God is sovereign and faithful, we may confidently affirm that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37). In fact, in this beatitude, Jesus states that the meek will "inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5) – an unexpected end from the perspectives of non-Christian worldviews, but a promise already stated in the Old Testament.

Although expressions like "inherit the land" and "inherit the earth" often alludes to entering and occupying the "promised land," in this beatitude the meaning is not completely territorial or material. This is because the idea has become a metaphor for God's people obtaining the total fulfillment of God's promises, and the total consummation of God's kingdom (Hebrews 4). That is, as "the ultimate vindication of the meek," God will fulfill all his wonderful promises to them, and "God will give them the high place they would not seize for themselves."¹²

Nevertheless, the promise is not completely spiritual or metaphorical. As the supreme example of meekness and gentleness, Jesus indeed inherited the whole earth, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). In addition, some theologians consider this beatitude consistent with the many biblical passages throughout the Old and New Testaments that affirm the postmillennial view of eschatology.

For example, Habakkuk 2:14 says, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." Contrary to many people's view of eschatology, Scripture does not say that Christ will come to subdue his enemies at his return, and only then to reign over the earth. Rather, it teaches that Christ is *now* reigning over all the earth at the right hand of God, and that having sat down at the right hand of God, "he *waits* for his enemies to be made his footstool" (Hebrews 10:13). Paul writes, "He must reign *until* he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25).

Although I must defer a detailed exposition of postmillennialism for another setting, it appears that this beatitude is consistent with the postmillennial expectation, grounded in numerous biblical promises, that the righteous will displace the wicked by the power of the gospel before the return of Christ.¹³

¹² France, p. 110.

¹³ Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*; P & R Publishing Company, 1999.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..." (v. 6)

God's people are those who are convinced of their spiritual poverty; they are convicted about their own sins and the sins of their people, so that they mourn over their wickedness; and they exhibit genuine meekness, humility, and gentleness because of God's work in their lives. In addition, God's work of conversion in them has produced a new basic desire, so that whereas they were the enemies of righteousness, now they "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6).

One's of Paul's major teachings is that no one can attain perfect righteousness by their good works; rather, it is God who sovereignly justifies a person by imputing the righteousness of Christ to his account. Therefore, although the Christian falls far short of perfect obedience to God's laws, so that he does not possess perfect personal righteousness, in Christ he has perfect legal righteousness before God, and it is on this basis that God accepts the believer.

Because this is such a pervasive and important biblical teaching, it is easy to impose this concept of righteousness in every place where Scripture uses the word. However, Scripture does not always use this word with this meaning of imputed legal righteousness. Matthew appears to use the word primarily in reference to a righteousness that satisfies the requirements of God's laws, and in terms of actual good works and behavior. Matthew is mainly referring to a right relationship with God based on obedience to his laws.

For example, in Matthew 3:15, Jesus tells John to baptize him "to fulfill all righteousness." It is obvious that "righteousness" here has no reference to a legal or imputed righteousness, but rather the personal righteousness of Christ as he obeys all of God's requirements.

Then, within the Sermon itself, the word is used several times to denote personal righteousness rather than imputed righteousness. Matthew 5:10 refers to those who are persecuted because of their righteousness. From the context of the Beatitudes, this clearly refers to the righteous actions and lifestyles of God's people, and not a righteousness that has been imputed to them.

As Peter writes, "If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:20), and "Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed" (3:14). Jesus and Peter are referring to persecution that comes because our righteous actions and lifestyles offend unbelievers. They are not referring to the imputed righteousness that is associated with our justification, but the personal righteousness with which we interact with this world, and that is associated with our sanctification.

Matthew 5:20 says that our righteousness must surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees, and then the Sermon goes on to explain how to truly obey God's laws in various areas. Then, Matthew 6:1 tells us not to perform our "acts of righteousness" before other people

to be seen by them, clearly showing that righteousness here refers to our personal righteousness, and not our legal standing before God.

Of course, Matthew is thoroughly consistent with Paul, for as I have mentioned, the very first beatitude already excludes all possible ways of attaining salvation other than by total dependence on God's mercy, which is to say, justification by grace through faith in Christ. The point is to establish what this word means in our context, so that we know what kind of righteousness God's people desire.

Again, Jesus is mainly *describing* the characteristics of "born again" people; he is mainly not telling people how to be born again. He is not saying, "If you want to be born again, then you must desire personal righteousness," but rather, "Those who are born again desire personal righteousness." Thus he is not teaching salvation by good works, but telling us what attitude born again people have toward good works.

Just as God's people do not only mourn about their individual sins, but also mourn about humanity's general state of sinfulness, and especially the sinfulness within the covenant community, God's people desire not only their individual personal righteousness, but they desire a broader righteousness – that is, to see righteousness done in society. They desire to see righteousness established in the church and in the world.

This desire is more than a mild preference – the beatitude says that they "hunger and thirst" for it. Hunger and thirst refer to our most basic physical need and desire. They are related to our very survival, so that they are not optional, and we cannot be nonchalant or indifferent about them. In a similar way, God's people hunger and thirst for personal righteousness. It is a basic need, and not just a preference.

This hunger for righteousness is another trait that distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. Christians and non-Christians have very different spiritual appetites, so that they desire even opposite things.

Christians "crave pure spiritual milk" (1 Peter 2:2), and the beatitude says that they hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jonathan Edwards writes, "The first effect of the power of God in the heart in regeneration is to give the heart a divine taste or sense; to cause it to have a relish of the loveliness and sweetness of the supreme excellency of the divine nature."¹⁴ And Henry Scougal says, "The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love."¹⁵

Books on homiletics often urge the minister to make biblical doctrine interesting to the hearers, but Scripture does not teach that this is his responsibility. If the minister happens to be an engaging speaker or writer, he may have a practical advantage, but Scripture itself holds him responsible only for content and clarity (2 Timothy 4:2; Colossians 4:4); that is, the minister's preaching and writing must be biblical and intelligible. If the hearers

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*; James Clarke and Co., 1971, p. 49.

¹⁵ Henry Scougal, *The Words of Henry Scougal*; Soli Deo Gloria, 2002; p. 12. See W. Gary Crampton, *What the Puritans Taught*; Soli Deo Gloria, 2003; p. 23-24.

are not interested, it is their fault – Christians should have a ferocious appetite for the things of God.

If you are a Christian, then you enjoy reading books on theological topics and listening to sermons on biblical passages – it is in your regenerated nature to enjoy these things. In addition, you hunger to do righteousness and to see righteousness done. As Jesus says, "My food...is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34). If you are a Christian, then you have a basic appetite to do the will of God.

In contrast, non-Christians have a very perverse appetite when it comes to spiritual things. Instead of following God's commands and treating his words as his "necessary food" (Job 23:12, KJV), each non-Christian "pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle (Jeremiah 8:6). He has "a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil" (Proverbs 6:18).

Non-Christians do not just prefer wickedness, but they pursue it. They eagerly look for opportunities, and come up with new ideas and ways to sin: "Even on his bed he plots evil; he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong" (Psalm 36:4). As for their spiritual appetite, they do not hunger for the knowledge and righteousness of God, but "They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence" (Proverbs 4:17).

Of course, the appetite for wickedness in some non-Christians is more obvious than in others, and if we succumb to the world's false definitions of right and wrong, some non-Christians can appear quite decent. But when we adopt the true definitions of right and wrong as stated in Scripture, we will notice that, in one way or another, all non-Christians have an insatiable appetite for wickedness.

This appetite for wickedness is often very blatant, as when non-Christians commit acts of fraud, violence, sexual immorality, and so forth. Many of them even demand the government and the church to officially condone their perverse lifestyles. Other non-Christians hunger after wickedness in less obvious ways, as when they hypocritically imitate Christian faith and love. Thus many non-Christians falsely claim to be Christians, and many of them are indeed excited about going to church. However, they go not because they desire to worship God, but because the act of singing hymns relaxes them and makes them feel spiritual. They desire to be entertained, and not to labor for the benefit of the church community. Or, they go not because they want to hear the word of God, but because they want to socialize, and maybe make some new business contacts.

No matter how they present themselves, they do not truly hunger after righteousness and holiness, but they wrap their wickedness and selfishness in Christian garb. In other words, although they claim to seek God, theirs is a self-centered spirituality, and a false Christianity.

To those who genuinely hunger and thirst for righteousness out of a regenerated heart, Jesus promises that "they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Just as the righteous and the

wicked desire opposite things, God has ordained opposite destinies for them: "The desire of the righteous ends only in good, but the hope of the wicked only in wrath" (Proverbs 11:23).

The Bible says, "What the righteous desire will be granted" (Proverbs 10:24). Careless people have misunderstood this and similar statements in the Bible. For example, Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart," but this does not mean that God will grant a person just anything, since one who truly delights in the Lord will not harbor selfish and satanic desires.

Those who are truly God's people hunger and thirst for righteousness, and "what the righteous desire will be granted." Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." In other words, just as God has foreordained to save those whom he has chosen, he has also foreordained the good works that we are to perform, so that just as he produces in us a hunger for righteousness at conversion, he also satisfies this hunger with good works that he has "prepared in advance for us to do."

Although the primary focus of this beatitude is probably personal righteousness and not universal righteousness or social justice, a Christian indeed desires a broader righteousness than on the individual level. He desires to see righteousness done in the church and in the world. The tools and weapons that God has given us to combat wickedness is mainly not physical or political, but spiritual. Therefore, although Christians may participate in political activities, so as to promote laws to maintain some semblance of righteousness in the land, they must not depend on the government to curb sin and injustice; rather, they must focus on preaching and teaching the word of God to the church and to the world, for sin is first a matter of the heart, which only a spiritual conversion can change.

Since Christians desire to establish righteousness in themselves, in the church, and in the world, it appears that the promise, "they will be filled," is again consistent with postmillennial eschatology, so that there will be a definite and broad fulfillment of this promise before the return of Christ, even if the ultimate fulfillment must await his return.

"Blessed are the merciful..." (v. 7)

At this point, some commentators suggest that Jesus moves from emphasizing our relationship with God to our relationship with other people: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Right away, we need to stress that this beatitude does not teach a tit-for-tat policy of giving and receiving mercy from God; that is, the verse cannot be saying that one must earn the mercy that he receives by giving out a corresponding measure of mercy.

First, elsewhere Scripture clearly teaches against a tit-for-tat policy when it comes to God's grace and mercy. Second, we have already noted that Jesus is *describing* the characteristics of born again people, rather than *prescribing* the conditions for being born

again. For sure, the beatitude cannot be teaching that we must earn God's mercy to save us from sin by first showing mercy to others, since if we could show such genuine mercy to others, then it would mean that we have already been saved and converted.

In other words, Jesus is not saying, "If you will be merciful, then you are blessed, because then you will receive mercy." Rather, he is saying, "God's people are merciful people – they are 'the merciful' – and merciful people are blessed, because they will receive mercy." Jesus *identifies them* as "the merciful" – he is not describing something that they have achieved or earned by being merciful. Scripture teaches that someone is merciful only because God has changed him and made him merciful, so that a merciful person is one who has already been converted by God. He is saved not because he has been merciful, but he is merciful because he has been saved.

On the relationship between grace and mercy, Terry Johnson writes:

Most of the commentators draw a distinction between grace, which deals with sin itself, providing pardon from guilt, and mercy, which deals with the results or consequences of sin. Or to put it another way, grace is concerned with forgiveness of sin, while mercy is concerned with relief from the pain, alienation, misery, and distress that is caused by sin.¹⁶

For example, in Luke 10:37, the Samaritan who took care of the injured traveler is correctly described as "the one who showed mercy" (NASB). Nevertheless, even if the above distinction is legitimate, we should keep in mind that the two are "frequently synonymous,"¹⁷ so that we should be careful and precise in exegesis, lest we draw false conclusions from passages containing these terms.

Non-Christians do not possess biblical mercy, and they cannot truly imitate it. Some of them are more obviously merciless, as Psalm 109:16 says, "For he never thought of doing a kindness, but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted." They consider the needs of others immaterial, and mercy inefficient. Hitler was such a person, but less extreme examples are everywhere in our society, appearing as politicians, businessmen, Catholic priests, adulterous spouses, and abusive parents. And if we would admit it, children can be some of the cruelest people in the world, their damage limited only by their lack of ability or resources.¹⁸

Others are not as blatant, but even as they put up a good front, they are cruel and vicious at heart, just as we were before God sovereignly converted us. In fact, some non-Christians can appear very merciful and generous, but what is the intellectual and moral

¹⁶ Terry L. Johnson, *When Grace Transforms*; Christian Focus Publications, 2002; p. 85.

¹⁷ Carson, *Jesus' Sermon*; p. 24.

¹⁸ People are shocked when news of children committing extreme acts of violence like murder and rape are reported. Perhaps they suppose that people are born good and innocent, but Scripture teaches otherwise, and says, "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him" (Proverbs 22:15). Children can be every bit as ruthless and manipulative as adults.

foundation for their actions? Non-Christians can only have selfish and humanistic motives, so that they do what they do to better themselves and others, not to glorify God or to express gratitude to him, but to assert autonomy from God and to glorify humanity. Therefore, although they will sometimes outwardly imitate Christian mercy, they remain inwardly wicked and defiant.

In addition, even what appears to be non-Christians' outward acts of mercy are often contrary to Scripture. For example, the church collects money through the voluntary giving of its members, and distributes part of this wealth to legitimate recipients, such as widows and orphans who have no other sources of help. In contrast, a secularized government whose laws rest on an unbiblical philosophy collects money through confiscatory taxation, and distributes much of this wealth to illegitimate recipients, such as people who refuse to work. What was called "relief" had become "welfare," and it is increasingly popular to call it "entitlement," as if it is something owed to them.

Contrary to this perverse system, Scripture does not define mercy as something that demands us to help every apparently needy person regardless of the reason for his situation. Rather, the church is to help only those who are truly in need, and not those who are simply lazy and irresponsible. For example, Paul teaches that not every widow qualifies for church aid, but only if she is of a certain age, has been faithful to her husband, and is known for her good deeds (1 Timothy 5:9-10). Moreover, he writes, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat'" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

These two rules alone exclude many or even most people from receiving aid, but churches that follow these and other related biblical instructions will certainly be called hard and merciless, even by many professing Christians. When Christians follow scriptural instructions, and refuse to accommodate humanistic definitions of kindness and courtesy, they are often accused of denying the teaching and example of Christ. Instead of letting them get away with this, Christians should rebuke these people for their ignorance of and disobedience toward Scripture. True mercy is that which is defined, commanded, and generated by God, exercised and expressed for the glory of God. But humanistic mercy is no mercy at all; rather, it comes from a defiant heart that seeks to "save" humanity apart from God.

"Blessed are the pure in heart..." (v. 8)

The next beatitude says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). Jesus is referring to a purity that is deeper than an external conformity to God's precepts, but he is speaking of a purity in the "heart."

Many theologians and commentators falsely distinguish between the heart and the mind; they seem to think that the heart is the whole or the deepest aspect of a person's personality, whereas the mind is just one aspect of the heart. Others claim that the heart consists of the mind (or intellect), the will, and the emotion; however, Scripture never states or implies this list.

It is a grave error to list the will and the emotion as if they are different parts from the mind within the human person, as if the will and the emotion are non-mental. Rather, since the will and the emotion are simply functions of the mind – that is, it is the mind that decides and emotes – they are mental by definition. Since this is the case, then to say that the heart consists of the mind, the will, and the emotion, is just an awkward way of saying that the heart is the mind.¹⁹

For the moment, if we will ignore the possible functional differences between the usage of the "heart" and the "mind," but rather focus on the ontological aspects of these two terms, then they are interchangeable. That is, *even if* the terms have different emphases when used in Scripture, they refer to the same part of the human person. Therefore, to be pure in the heart is to be pure in the mind, and in all the functions that the mind performs; to have an impure heart, then, is to have an impure mind, thus impure thoughts, beliefs, motives, decisions, and emotions.

The term or concept of a "pure heart" occurs several times elsewhere in the Bible, and of course, Jesus is using the term in a way that is consistent with its biblical meaning. With this in mind, Psalm 24 offers a rich context from which we may understand the kind of person who is pure in heart: "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false" (v. 3-4).

The person who is pure in heart "does not lift up his soul to an idol."²⁰ His "purity" consists of a single-minded devotion to God; he belongs to "the generation of those who seek him" (v. 6). There are no "idols" – abominable and distracting things – to obscure his focus on Jesus Christ. To the "double-minded," James says, "purify your hearts" (James 4:8).

As mentioned, in the Beatitudes, Jesus is describing those to whom belong the kingdom of heaven. God's people are those whose basic dispositions God has so transformed that, although they still struggle against sin, they are the "pure in heart," and to the extent that God's people allow idols and distractions to remain in their lives, they suffer a lack of assurance. Accordingly, Terry Johnson writes:

Ask yourself, is my love of God pure? Does He have my whole heart? Does He have my absolute allegiance? Or is my heart divided? Our hearts must be pure, singular, uncorrupted. Do you love wealth more? Or sports? Or power? Or pleasure? Only the pure will see God. No one else shall.²¹

¹⁹ To illustrate, it is awkward to say that the stomach (or some other word) consists of the stomach and digestion – no, the stomach is the stomach; digestion is merely one of its functions. These are not two different parts within the human body.

²⁰ The HCSB states that he "has not set his mind on what is false," showing that purity of heart refers to the condition of one's mind.

²¹ Johnson, p. 100.

Pure devotion to God – faithful service to him without mixture or deceit – also conditions the way we relate to other people, and thus Psalm 24:6 continues to say that he who is pure in heart does not "swear by what is false" – he "has not sworn deceitfully" (NASB). The pure in heart will deal with people with sincerity, without deceit and ulterior motives. We must then ask ourselves the corresponding questions:

Am I living a clean, pure, holy life? Or am I allowing corruption into my life one small step at a time? Have I begun to tolerate dishonesty? Or pride? Or lust? Or covetousness? Am I indulging lies, even if they're only white lies? Am I indulging theft, even if its only petty theft? Am I indulging "innocent" flirtations, "harmless" gossip, or "soft" pornography?²²

If even believers struggle to maintain purity in the heart, then unbelievers cannot even start – their hearts are utterly corrupt and depraved. Jesus says, "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:21-23).

Because man's heart is utterly ruined, he has no power or desire to change, so that God must initiate any change in him. God effects this change only in those whom he has chosen, and he does it by giving them faith in Christ. As Peter says when referring to some Gentile Christians, "[God] purified their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9). This is what God promised by the prophet Ezekiel: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:25-26).

As for the reprobates, they can never be pure in heart. Some of them freely indulge in evil thoughts and imaginations – their minds are full of idols, lies, and lusts for various things. They love what God hates, and hate what God loves. Others try to imitate true inward purity, but since they have never been transformed by God through faith in Christ, anything that they seem to achieve is not relative to or based on a sincere desire to glorify and please God. Therefore, their efforts in attaining purity of heart apart from Christ are just additional attempts at self-salvation, which God detests.

To those who are truly pure in heart, Jesus promises that "they will see God." Right away, we must note that Jesus is not necessarily promising us an empirical sensation or experience in which we physically "look at" God. Even in English, besides "to perceive by sight," the word "see" can mean, among other things, "to come to know: DISCOVER," "to perceive the meaning or importance of: UNDERSTAND," "to be aware of: RECOGNIZE," "to imagine as a possibility: SUPPOSE," "to regard as: JUDGE," and "to grasp something mentally."²³

²² Ibid., p. 96.

²³ Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.

To give an example from Scripture, Jesus says in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." He does not mean that the kingdom is empirically invisible to the unbelievers, but then it suddenly becomes empirically visible to those whom God regenerates. Rather, his meaning corresponds with something that he says almost immediately afterward in verse 5: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Based on the context, it is much more natural and appropriate to regard the meaning of "see" in verse 3 as something like "discover," "understand," or "come to know."

Another example comes from John 12:40, which is a quotation from Isaiah: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them." In its context, it is obvious that the words "blinded their eyes" do not refer to a physical blindness, but instead have the exact meaning of "deadened their hearts." That they cannot "see with their eyes" refers to the fact that they cannot "understand with their hearts." Again, "see" here does not refer to anything empirical, but it refers to something intellectual.

If we have even a general knowledge of Scripture, we will immediately understand that the promise, "they will see God," cannot refer to an empirical sensation or experience; that is, Jesus cannot be promising that the "pure in heart" will physically "look at" God. This is because "God is spirit" (John 4:24), so that he is invisible (Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27). Nevertheless, there is a sense that people do "see" God, as when Manoah, Samson's father, exclaims, "We have seen God!" (Judges 13:22). But when we examine the context in which Manoah makes this statement, we readily understand that he did not physically perceive God in his divine essence, but he saw only "the angel of the Lord."

Thus, whenever biblical characters "see" God in a physical sense, they are always referring to a manifestation or revelation of God that God had generated – God in his essence remains invisible. This is consistent with our affirmation that God is unknowable unless he chooses to disclose himself, as when John writes, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). That is, you cannot go somewhere to "look at" God, but he has spoken to us by his prophets and apostles, and revealed himself through the incarnation of Christ.

What, then, does it mean to "see" God? John writes, "Anyone who does what is good is *from God*. Anyone who does what is evil has not *seen God*" (3 John 11), as if he who does what is good has indeed "seen God." Obviously, in the sense that he who does evil has not seen God, he who does good has seen God, and within the verse, having "seen God" parallels being "from God." Therefore, instead of referring to an empirical sensation or experience, to "see" God is an expression referring to a relationship with God and a revelation from God. To see God, then, is to grasp him with the mind and be transformed by him. The word "see" is used with intellectual and relational connotations,

and not in the empirical sense, so that D. A. Carson appropriately equates "seeing God" with "fellowship with God."²⁴

Thus the promise of Jesus is not "If you will become pure enough in your heart, I will let you take a look at God," but rather, "Those of you who are pure in heart – the Christians – are blessed, because God will reveal himself to you and cause you to know him!" Of course, Christians already know God to a certain extent, and thus they have already "seen" him in a certain sense. However, just as the other characteristics described in the other beatitudes will not reach perfection until the final consummation of God's kingdom, these promises in the beatitudes will not be completely fulfilled until that time. Just as God will perfect the hearts of his people when Christ comes, God will also grant them a fuller revelation of himself. As Scripture says, "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2), and "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).²⁵

"Blessed are the peacemakers..." (v. 9)

Then, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). The "peace" here is an objective and relational peace, not a subjective and emotional one; that is, it has to do with peaceful relationships.

The blessing is not for those who merely love or desire peace, it is not for those who merely have a friendly or sociable disposition, and it is not for those who passively accept or tolerate unrighteousness. Instead, just as Christ blesses those who not merely accept righteousness but rather those who hunger for it, he blesses those who "make" peace. In other words, his blessing is for those who actively make peaceful relationships happen. As Psalm 34:14 says, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." Since peacemaking involves active interventions in difficult relational conflicts, and since it works against the sinful dispositions of man, it is not a weakness, but a spiritual strength by which the peacemaker overcomes evil with goodness and wisdom.

God himself sets the supreme example of peacemaking in decreeing the plan of redemption. Paul writes:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16; also Colossians 1:19-20).

²⁴ Carson, *Jesus' Sermon*; p. 26.

²⁵ Note that the word "see" here again means something other than empirical perception, but it corresponds with "know," and refers to one's intellectual comprehension.

Stated positively, the peacemaker's goal is the reconciliation between two parties; stated negatively, his goal is to end the hostility between them.

Humankind consists of rebellious creatures who hate God and defy his will; they are his enemies. But then, God reaches out to the elect and establishes peace with them through the redemptive work of Christ. To reconcile the elect sinners to God, Christ took upon himself a human body, and died a violent death on the cross. True peace comes by satisfying divine justice, not by ignoring it. Peace does not imply a passive acceptance or tolerance, but an active role in making things right. This also means that peacemaking can often be very costly.

The beatitude says that the peacemakers will be called "the sons of God." This does not refer only to the doctrine of adoption, whereby God establishes a filial relationship with those whom he has chosen, but it is also an expression in which to be the "sons of" someone or something means to bear the likeness or the characteristic of someone or something.

For example, 1 Samuel 2:12 says, "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial" (KJV). In terms of blood relations, they were the sons of Eli, but they took after the characteristics of the false god Belial, and thus the second part of the verse explains that "they knew not the Lord." The NIV paraphrases, and says, "Eli's sons were wicked men." Paul calls non-Christians "the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2, 5:6; Colossians 3:6; NASB) – obviously not referring to their blood relations, but to their character.

God indeed establishes a filial relationship with his elect through the redemptive work of Christ, and his children exhibit a family resemblance to their Father; therefore, just as the Father is the supreme peacemaker, his children imitate him in loving and making peace, and in facilitating reconciliation.

There are several major ways by which God's children are to be peacemakers in this world.

First, they participate in reconciling the elect to God by preaching the gospel. Just as God the Father sets the supreme example of making peace, God the Son sets the supreme example of preaching peace, so much so that he is called "the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Peter says that God sent Jesus Christ to preach "the good news of peace" (Acts 10:36), and Paul writes, "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17).

But the gospel of peace is not a message of appeasement or compromise. While instructing his readers to "put on the full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:13), Paul writes that they are to have their "feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (v. 15). He sees the Christian as a soldier, preaching the gospel in the context of a spiritual war. In this war, the gospel of peace is as the footwear by which a soldier advances and stands his ground (v. 13-14).

When Isaiah considers those who "bring good news," he says that they proclaim "peace," "good news," and "salvation," but the message is not one that suggests a truce between God and men; rather it is one that says, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7). The gospel message facilitates reconciliation by proclaiming God's rulership, not by agreeing with man's illusion about his own freedom and goodness. In other words, true peace is not promoted by appeasement or compromise, but by conquering the hearts of men by the word of God, that is, the gospel of peace.

God has committed to Christians "the ministry of reconciliation," to preach "the message of reconciliation":

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:18-20)

The message of reconciliation does not teach that God indiscriminately pardons all human beings, but that he pardons only those to whom he sovereignly grants repentance from sin and faith in Christ.

Instead of ignoring his conflict with men, God chooses to resolve it. Rather than making peace by suspending his standard of justice, or by surrendering to or compromising with mankind, God makes peace only on his terms. One way or another, he refuses to let matters stand unresolved – a person will either believe in Christ and be saved, or he will suffer endless torment in hell.

Second, in addition to reconciling the elect to God through the gospel, peacemaking also applies to all human relationships. God commands Christians to live in peace among themselves; however, Christians seldom live in perfect harmony because they are still sinful people living in a sinful world. Therefore, even true Christians can sometimes be selfish, contentious, and even dishonest. Adding to this the fact that many people in our churches are not even Christians at all but are false converts, disputes and disagreements within the covenant community will happen.

God has made provisions for this in Scripture; he has established procedures by which Christians can and must resolve their disputes and disagreements. As Jesus teaches in Matthew 18:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the

church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (v. 15-17)

The general pattern is to begin the process of reconciliation by a private confrontation between the parties directly involved, escalating the situation and making it more public with each step as the offender continues to deny responsibility or as he refuses to repent and ask for forgiveness. If he refuses to hear even "the church" (probably referring to the elders of the church),²⁶ then the entire covenant community must expel and shun this offender, at least until he finally repents.

Many churches today are afraid to obey God in this area of conflict resolution, and if necessary, church discipline and excommunication. Both the church leaders and the church members often prefer to have unbelievers judge their cases in a secular court, as if they are better at biblical conflict resolution! To the Corinthians, Paul writes, "I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another – and this in front of unbelievers!" (1 Corinthians 6:5-6). Many church members are foolish and disobedient, refusing to initiate the process of confrontation and reconciliation that Christ teaches, and many church leaders are useless and spineless people, refusing to hear and judge disputes among their people.

Again, we notice that reconciliation does not imply appeasement, surrender, ignoring the problem, or pretending that the offence does not exist; rather, God commands reconciliation by resolution, and by explicitly dealing with the dispute. Sometimes Christians think that they are being unforgiving if they demand the offender's repentance, but Jesus says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents*, forgive him" (Luke 17:3).

There is much more to say about the above and other related passages. For now, the point that I wish to get across is that biblical peace does not entail hiding our problems, but peacemaking demands reconciliation, which requires an explicit confrontation with the dispute and the parties involved. In addition, we must resolve such disputes using only biblical precepts and principles, for just as God makes peace only on his own terms, God's children also must make peace only on his terms, and not on their own terms or that of the offenders.

Third, besides calling for reconciliation with the elect and then among the elect, God also wants his people to live in peace with those outside of the covenant community as much as possible. As Christians, we live in this world with and among many unbelievers, and have many dealings with them. Our own remaining sinfulness already cause enough problems as it is, but the great wickedness of non-Christians burden society with even more disputes and disagreements. Many conflicts will arise between Christians and non-Christians just because both are sinful human beings living in this world, but many other conflicts will arise because of the fundamentally different belief systems of the Christians and the non-Christians.

²⁶ See my *Commentary on Philippians* where I deal with this topic.

Scripture teaches, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men," but it also recognizes that not everything is within our control, so that Paul writes, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). The words "if it is possible" imply that it may not always be possible to maintain peaceful relationships, and the words "as far as it depends on you" mean that it is not always up to you to maintain peace in these relationships.

Some people speak as if Jesus and the apostles lived in peace with everyone, and that it is possible for us to do so. This is false – they did not do it, it is not always possible, and it is not always up to us. Even when we make every effort to maintain the peace in a relationship, the other party may disregard scriptural principles, human laws, and common decency when dealing with you.

In such cases, we may still try to make peace, at times by enduring injustice and suffering loss, but there are occasions when it is appropriate to bring the matter before the state court. It is true that Paul says there should not be lawsuits among believers (1 Corinthians 6:7), and that is why we must first follow the procedure dictated to us by Christ, who says that we should treat the unrepentant church member as "a pagan" (Matthew 18:17), which means that the matter may then be taken to a secular court if necessary or appropriate. In all cases, we must seek to minimize the conflict and to effect reconciliation without compromising biblical principles.

Non-Christians cannot be peacemakers. Of course, some of them do not care about making peace at all, but even those who claim that they care cannot be true peacemakers. They do not follow the biblical definition of peace, nor the biblical principles for peacemaking; they have their own false ideas of peace, and the ways to make and maintain this peace.

For example, some of them may assume a passive attitude about disputes and disagreements, so that they will not confront the offender about his sins. And even if some of them do seek confrontation, since they do not define peace as reconciliation by biblical principles and procedures, they will not follow Scripture's instructions in Matthew 18 and elsewhere on the subject.

Non-Christian peacemaking is thoroughly humanistic, that is, their primary concern is human welfare, human unity, and human principles – not to obey and glorify God. This means that many of them will tend to compromise religious principles – even of false religions – to appease others. Therefore, it is not rare for unbelievers to become truly intimate friends even when their religious views appear very different, it is commonplace for an unbeliever to even convert to a new religion just to marry someone.

Many seem to have the strange idea that true Christianity does not cause divisions among people. But Jesus says:

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:34-37)

Christ demands our total loyalty, so that rather than maintaining a false and humanistic peace at the expense of our faith, if it comes to a choice, we must maintain our faith at the expense of peace.

We live in a day when humanistic values have infiltrated our churches, so that it is common for the leaders and members to promote false peace, but this only covers up real and persisting problems. Nevertheless, false peacemakers would rather cover up the problems than to confront and resolve them. Thus many professing Christians try to find essential common ground with Catholics, Mormons, Muslims, Buddhists, and even atheists. They can only do this by compromising the biblical gospel, and this can only lead to a false peace that will cause much greater problems for them later on.

On the other hand, the true gospel divides humanity into two groups of people – the Christians and the non-Christians. This is because the gospel is as a great light that exposes our evil deeds and evil hearts, removing ambiguities in our beliefs and allegiances, so that we either reject Christ and be condemned, or accept him by God's sovereign grace. True peacemakers are called the sons of God, but non-Christians can only be false peacemakers at best, and they are called the sons of disobedience.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness..." (v. 10)

One might think that the world would readily welcome those described by these beatitudes. Surely no one in his right mind would hate or oppose those who are humble, godly, and merciful. The problem is that unbelievers are mentally and morally defective (Romans 1), so that no non-Christian is in his right mind, and it is precisely those who are humble, godly, and merciful that they hate and oppose.

As described in the Beatitudes, the Christian is the antithesis of the non-Christian. The two are spiritual opposites, and the more developed and mature the Christian is in his sanctification, the more the contrast becomes evident to the non-Christian. Jesus exhibited perfect righteousness when he was on the earth, and the non-Christians murdered him for it. As Christians, although we do not exhibit perfect righteousness, to the extent that we follow Christ's teaching and example, and to the extent that we preach the biblical gospel, our righteousness and our message will contrast against the wickedness and the unbelief of the non-Christians, who will not tolerate being exposed and embarrassed by God's people.

Accordingly, Jesus concludes the Beatitudes by saying, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). Although verse 11 begins with the word "blessed," we know that verse 10 is the final beatitude in the series for several reasons. First, in terms of construction, verse 11 is different from verse 10 and the previous beatitudes. Second, in terms of content, verse 11 does not proceed to a different characteristic, but it expands on what is said in verse 10. Third, whereas verse 10 and the previous beatitudes are stated in the third person ("blessed are those"), verses 11 and 12 are stated in the second person ("blessed are you"). Fourth, as mentioned earlier, Jesus uses the rhetorical device of "inclusio" when he repeats the blessing or promise, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3, 10), effectively concluding in verse 10 the series of beatitudes that started in verse 3.

Since verses 11 and 12 expand on what is said in verse 10, they help us to understand the meaning and implications of verse 10. Jesus blesses those who are "persecuted." Verse 11 expands on the idea of persecution and says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you."

The word "insult" refers to verbal abuse. Non-Christians often verbally attack us with derogatory names and labels. Because of our justified skepticism and denial of their false intellectual theories and assertions, they call us stupid, gullible, and irrational. Because of our stand for righteousness as defined by Scripture, they call us bigots, haters, and narrow-minded. Christian teenagers are mocked because of their chastity; Christian businessmen are ridiculed for their honesty; and all kinds of Christians are insulted and criticized for exhibiting the true charity that God commands, rather than the false charity that the world demands. Non-Christians blaspheme God and mock his people; they label the divine standard of morality as immorality. What is evil, they call good; what is good, they call evil.

The non-Christians do not limit themselves to attacking Christians with insults, but they also "persecute" them, which emphasizes the actions that they take to oppose and suppress God's people. Persecution comes in various forms, from the mild and inconvenient, to the severe and extreme. Some new converts are shunned by their families and friends. Some Christian students are openly harassed by their professors and classmates, perhaps for believing in biblical moral absolutes, the blood atonement, heaven and hell, and divine judgment. Some universities have withheld degrees from students who affirm the biblical account of creation. Governments often enact policies that restrict the Christians' freedom of speech, and some places even forbid Christians to promote certain biblical teachings and practices in their own homes. In some situations, for Christians to profess and practice their faith may entail loss of finances and opportunities. Then, in some places around the world, Christians are often beaten, jailed, and even killed.

However, non-Christians behave this way not because truth is on their side, and deep in their hearts – and at times even on the very surface of their consciousness – they know that the Christian faith is true, and that all those who remain non-Christians are doomed to hellfire and endless suffering. As they try to convince themselves otherwise, they lash

out against those who constantly remind them of their foolishness and wickedness, and their impending torment in hell. But if they were to see and speak the truth, they would condemn themselves, and so they "falsely say" all kinds of evil things against Christians and Christianity, trying to discredit what they innately perceive to be the truth.

All non-Christians are mentally and morally defective, and spiritually unenlightened and depraved; therefore, their response to the truth of the Christian faith can barely rise above the level of stupid beasts. Thus instead of challenging Christians with sound argumentation, they resort to mockery and persecution that are based on nothing more than slander.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that if you claim to be a Christian, then all non-Christians are necessarily wrong whenever they oppose you. The beatitude refers only to those who are persecuted "because of righteousness" (v. 10). As Peter explains, "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer *as a Christian*, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:15-16).

If you claim to be a Christian but then steal from someone, then you ought to be prosecuted and punished, and be fined or even jailed. If you claim to be a Christian but then murder someone, then you ought to be tried and convicted, and perhaps even suffer the death penalty. In these cases, you would not be persecuted "as a Christian," nor would you suffer "because of righteousness," but you would be receiving the just punishment due to a criminal.

If you engage in biblically prohibited activities, then even if you suffer punishment or mistreatment from improper or unauthorized sources, you still may not construe it as persecution because of righteousness. For example, when one gangster kills another gangster, it does not mean that the gangster who gets killed dies because of his righteousness, but he dies as a criminal, not a Christian.

Likewise, if a fanatic blows up an abortion clinic and kills numerous abortionists, although Scripture opposes the fanatic's action as sinful, this does not automatically make the abortionists into righteous martyrs. Instead, both the fanatic and the abortionists will be condemned to hell for their sins. Again, a homosexual who is cruelly beaten by a group of people who oppose homosexuality is not suffering because of righteousness, but because of his sin of homosexuality – he suffers as a sinner and a criminal, even though Scripture also condemns those who beat him.

This does not mean that Christians should have no sympathy for or offer no help to those who suffer because of their wickedness – such as those who suffer permanent physical damage for having undergone abortions, or homosexuals who have contracted AIDS because of their deviant lifestyle – but let us not deceive those who suffer for these and other reasons as to why they are suffering. They are not heroes, but sinners and criminals. If they deny this, then they will die in their sins, and our unbiblical and humanistic sympathy will be powerless to help them.

In verse 11, Christ equates "because of righteousness" (v.10) with "because of me." This immediately restricts the meaning of righteousness, and thus the application of this beatitude. To suffer because of righteousness is to suffer because of Christ; therefore, no non-Christian can ever suffer because of righteousness – they always suffer for other reasons.

You may object, "But what about those non-Christians who labored and suffered much for the welfare of humanity?" Since our verse is a biblical beatitude blessing those who suffer because of righteousness, we must also employ only the biblical definition of righteousness. Suffering for a purely humanistic cause or agenda does not count as suffering because of righteousness. Christ himself says that to suffer because of righteousness means to suffer because of Christ, and Peter echoes this when he says that one should suffer only "as a Christian." Therefore, to suffer because of righteousness means to suffer as a Christian, that is, a follower of Christ in creed and in conduct.

In John 15, Jesus says something to his disciples that corresponds with equating suffering because of righteousness with suffering because of Christ:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: "No servant is greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. (v. 18-20)

Christianity endorses only biblical righteousness, which is inseparably identified with Christ. Indeed, if you were to advocate and practice a humanistic righteousness, the world would "love you as its own." But whereas humanistic righteousness is admired and encouraged, Christian righteousness is despised and persecuted.

If you are a Christian, then Christ has "chosen you out of the world." Whereas the world follows the devil as its leader, you have been sovereignly chosen to follow Christ as your king. Non-Christians resent Christ and his "intrusion" into their lives, and therefore they will resent you for being a Christian.

As mentioned, the Beatitudes describe the characteristics of the subjects of Christ's kingdom. Although Christ rules over the whole world, non-Christians reject his authority, and these rebels persecute the subjects because they hate the king. Of course, they may claim to be righteousness, and some of them even claim to be followers of Christ. But Christ says, "If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." Do these people affirm and obey the apostolic teachings that we related to them from Scripture? If they do not, then they are not the followers of Christ, but they are liars and imposters.

Because Christ identifies suffering for righteousness with suffering for him, the inevitable conclusion is that no non-Christian can truly suffer for righteousness. They never suffer for what is truly right, but at best they suffer only for what *they think* is right. The two are very different – as different as heaven and hell. They may claim that they are suffering because of righteousness and even because of Christ, but if they are not suffering for what Scripture teaches as right, then they are only suffering because of themselves.

As one writer notes, "Don't make a martyr out of yourself and call everyone else Pharisees and hypocrites";²⁷ however, this is precisely what many people do when they are criticized for practicing some moral perversion (e.g. divorce, homosexuality) or affirming some doctrinal aberration (e.g. open theism; charismatic excesses). Christ is referring to those who suffer for what Scripture defines as righteousness – the person who suffers not for biblical righteousness, but only for what *he thinks* as right, in the end suffers for nothing other than *self-righteousness*.

However, it remains that there are those who are persecuted because of true righteousness, that is, because they affirm and obey the teachings of Christ. Jesus says that the proper response is, "Rejoice and be glad" (Matthew 5:12). As Peter writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Acts 5:41 says that the apostles rejoiced "because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." They were able to rejoice not because they had gone insane, but because they had a firm knowledge of reality, as to for what and for whom they were enduring such persecution and reproach. Peter writes, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14). Along with all genuine Christians, he regards the reality and purity of his faith as more precious than his physical comfort and convenience: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1:6-7).

Matthew 5:10 tells us why those who suffer persecution because of Christ is blessed: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" This verse confirms that, in these beatitudes, Jesus is not so much *prescribing* the conditions for entering the kingdom of heaven as he is *describing* the characteristics of those to whom the kingdom belongs. In other words, he is not saying, "If you will get persecuted enough because of righteousness, then you will inherit the kingdom of heaven," but rather, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness – that is, the Christians – because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."

Then, verse 12 expands on this and says, "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before

²⁷ Johnson, p. 125.

you." We can rejoice when we suffer for Christ because God approves of us and he will reward us. Also, we can rejoice because when we suffer for Christ, we are identified with the biblical prophets who suffered for their righteous obedience toward God.

The reward here does not refer to a tit-for-tat principle, but as one commentator writes, it refers to "a freely given recompense, out of all proportion to the service."²⁸ Any reward that God gives us is in reality "out of all proportion to the service," because any service that we render to God is owed to him in the first place. As Jesus teaches, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10). God rewards us because of his sovereign kindness, and not because he owes us a compensation. Concerning Moses, Hebrews 11:26 says, "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward." This is the proper attitude of the righteous.

The Jews would consider it a great honor to be identified with the biblical prophets, and to the extent that we have adopted the biblical worldview, we would think the same way. Verse 12 is saying that just as the ancient prophets suffered for God, we follow in their footsteps when we suffer for Christ. Incidentally, by saying that the believers who suffer for him is as the prophets who suffered for God, Jesus here makes an implicit but altogether unambiguous claim to deity.

Nowadays, because so many people falsely claim to be Christians, and because so many people falsely claim to be suffering for Christ or for righteousness, Christians must maintain and proclaim a clear distinction between the true and false definitions of righteousness, and draw a clear line between the church and the world.

However, the false gospels of Arminianism and revivalism has brought an unprecedented number of false converts into our churches. Since most professing Christians are in fact non-Christians, so that their hearts have never been truly transformed by God, it is not surprising that there are such an overwhelming number of church scandals involving sexual immorality, financial mismanagement, and other wicked behaviors that ought to be found mostly in the world and not in the church.

In other words, it often seems that Christians sin just as badly and just as often as non-Christians, because most professing Christians are in fact non-Christians. Thus non-Christians ridicule the gospel because so-called "Christians" demonstrate little to no difference in their use of language, choice of entertainment, and their degree of honesty, courage, and intelligence. Others argue that the gospel has no impact in people's lives because these so-called "Christians" seem to have just as high a divorce rate as the non-Christians.

The solution is to make a clearer distinction between Christians and non-Christians (which includes false converts) through biblical preaching and church discipline. By boldly and clearly preaching the biblical gospel, we will attract fewer false converts into

²⁸ France, p. 112.

our churches, and repel many of those who are already in our churches. More of our hearers will either be converted, or remain outside of the covenant community (Acts 5:13). By requiring a basic doctrinal test of their profession, we will make fewer mistakes in extending "the right hand of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9) to those who desire to be members or even elders in our churches. By faithfully exercising church discipline, including the practice of church trials and excommunication, we will remove from our midst more false converts and sinners who may bring shame and disgrace to the church and the name of Christ.

For example, the recent and widely publicized scandal about the prevalent homosexuality and pedophilia among Catholic priests should have no bearing on Christian churches at all, if we have all along made clear that Catholicism is not Christianity. The same goes for the several Mormon kidnappers. Since Catholics and Mormons are not Christians, we expect at least some of them to be homosexuals, pedophiles, and kidnappers. Just as the Christian is not required to offer any defense for what a Buddhist or an atheist does, the credibility of his faith has no relationship to what Catholics and Mormons do. It is thoroughly consistent with biblical teaching that non-Christians would habitually participate in the most perverse and basest of sins. Because they are not Christians, we expect them to do these things.

This by no means imply that true Christians are perfect and sinless, but it does relieve us of the responsibility to answer for those people who really have nothing to do with us in the first place. As for the sins within the true covenant community, we must exercise church discipline to deal with them swiftly and decisively, so that by the time the world finds out about these sins, we will have already done something about them. This way, we will show both those who are inside and outside of the community that we both preach and enforce the biblical standard of morality.

Nevertheless, as our final beatitude shows, the world will not thank us for practicing and defending righteousness, but it will insult, persecute, and slander us. However, even as the unbelievers persecute us, they are able to do so only "if it is God's will" (1 Peter 3:17; also Philippians 1:29). Just as God's absolute sovereignty controls the smallest thought, action, and event, he exercises complete control over how and when unbelievers persecute his own people, and he decrees everything to happen for the edification of the Christians, and the damnation of the non-Christians (Romans 8:28, 9:22-24).

As Christians, when we suffer persecution in this life because of our faith in Christ (2 Timothy 3:12), we know that a better future awaits us, and so we are blessed: "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17). On the other hand, the unbelievers will have a very different fate: "Wretched are the uncommitted for convenience's sake, for their destination is hell."²⁹

²⁹ *Life Application Bible Commentary: Matthew*; Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996; p. 76.

THEIR INFLUENCE (Matthew 5:13-16)

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

If in verses 10-12 Jesus describes the approach that non-Christians take toward Christians, then in verses 13-16 he prescribes the approach that Christians should take toward non-Christians. And whereas in verses 10-12 Jesus tells us that non-Christians are persecutors and slanderers, in verses 13-16 he tells us that Christians are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

Commentators point out that "you" is emphatic in the Greek, thus accentuating the contrast between the church and the world, the followers of Christ and the followers of Satan. It also reinforces the fact that Christ is referring only to Christians, and not the non-Christians. In other words, only Christians are as salt and light in this world, and not the non-Christians.

Salt was one of the most useful substances in the ancient world. It could function as a purifier and seasoning, but the people used it primarily as a preservative. Rubbing salt into meat retards its decay. At that time, most salt was dug from the shores of the Dead Sea instead of obtained by the evaporation of salt water. Since there were no refineries, what was called salt was in fact a mixture of actual salt and other minerals.

Actual salt could not lose its flavor, but it was the most soluble, so that it could be dissolved or washed away. Although the residue looked similar to the original compound, having lost the properties and benefits of salt, it could no longer function as a preservative. Or, the actual salt could be mixed with so many impurities as to render the actual salt impotent and ineffective.

The people would then throw out this "salt" on to the road, or scattered it on the top of their houses to harden their flat roofs and to prevent leaks. Since the roads were for commute and the roofs were for group gatherings and for children to play on, the "salt" that had lost its flavor literally became road dust, to be stepped on by people.

Non-Christians are evil to the core – if left to themselves, they have no power to prevent their own deterioration, and all human societies would become increasingly perverse and corrupt. But Christians are the salt of the earth. Although genuine transformation can come only by spiritual regeneration, by applying Christian influence to the world, God is preserving it from plunging into complete chaos and insanity.

As the world heads toward greater corruption and ultimate destruction, by their unique distinctives (such as those listed in the Beatitudes), Christians labor toward the very opposite direction. This naturally generates great hostility from the unbelievers, so that they insult, persecute, and slander the Christians, when Christians are precisely what the world needs for civilization to survive.

Christians face constant resistance from unbelievers, and they often sense the pressure to compromise their distinctives and to conform to the world. Just as salt becomes useless when it is dissolved or diluted, Christians lose their effectiveness when they allow their beliefs and practices to be dissolved by fear and compromise, and their influence is diluted when they allow false doctrines to invade their minds, and false converts to infiltrate their churches.

Examples of compromise abound in the lives of contemporary Christians. Sometimes they conform their own thinking and behavior to the unbelieving culture around them, and sometimes they even compromise the gospel to please those who hear them. Sinclair Ferguson says it well:

Cease to be different, and we cease to be Christians. How slow we often are to learn this lesson. At times we fall into the trap of being blackmailed by a world that says, "Unless I find your life attractive *on my own terms*, I will not respond to the message of the gospel." But if we yield at that point, we become prisoners of perpetual blackmail.

I have sometimes heard Christians witness to people in these terms: "You mustn't think being a Christian takes away your fun. I can enjoy doing the same things you do. Being a Christian isn't a series of don'ts!" Much of this may be true, but why should the church be so concerned to tell the world that it is not really very different from the world?³⁰ The church then becomes both powerless and pointless.³¹

Within a very short period of time, churches everywhere have embraced religious pluralism, moral relativism, political activism, and biological evolutionism. They have adopted secular and unbiblical theories on everything from psychology to cosmology, and from education to administration. They encourage abortionists to promote their cause, and ordain homosexuals to the ministry.

"Salt" in rabbinic metaphorical language often carries the idea of "wisdom." As Paul writes, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6). Christ's use of salt as a metaphor implies that Christians are the sages, whereas non-Christians are the fools of this world.

³⁰ The non-Christian's idea of "fun" should not be a test for truth in the first place. Even if one would lose all his "fun" as a Christian, so what? It does not mean that the Christian faith is false.

³¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987; p. 61.

The words, "loses its saltiness" (v. 13; *mōranthē*), in other contexts mean "to become foolish." Indeed, claiming to be houses of worship, many churches have become dens of morons – that is, they are filled with unbelievers. God disapproves of them, and the world *still* laughs at them. They have become worthless like the unbelievers.

Helmut Thielicke comments that we are not supposed to be the honey of this world, but the salt. To the world, we are not supposed to be entirely pleasant, but there is supposed to be a biting quality about us. Whether they experience a sting of conscience or a surge of resentment when we are around, we are not supposed to let them sin comfortably.

In another place, Jesus says that Christians are "not of the world" (John 17:16) even as they live in the world. Rather, Christians are from God, sanctified by his word (v. 17) and sent into the world by Christ (v. 18). Does this mean that Christians are superior? It most certainly does. Many professing Christians would cringe at such a claim, but if it is false, then it is no better to be a Christian than it is to be a non-Christian.

To say that Christians are by no means superior to non-Christians undermines the gospel itself, and reeks of false humility. The only qualification that we must add is that Christians are not inherently superior, but that they are made better by the sovereign grace of God. It is only because God has made us better that we are able to function as "salt" to positively influence this world. If we are not better than unbelievers, then we *are* unbelievers.

Even if we had neglected to consider the historical background about the usage of salt in the ancient world, the point of the passage is clear. Those people described by the Beatitudes are the salt of the earth. Instead of taking them out of the world, God applies this salt to the world. However, if they lose their unique characteristics, so that they no longer exhibit them or interact with the world with them, then they are no longer effective as the followers of Christ. Instead of affecting the world, they will be trampled by it. Therefore, Christ warns that our Christian qualities must not be dissolved or diluted by the world. "Christians should not blend in with everyone else,"³² because Christ has called them to be different and superior.

Jesus says that Christians are also like light. Nowadays, light is often taken for granted, especially by those who live in areas that are relatively advanced in technology. Power outages may be rare for us, but when they happen, they remind us of the inconveniences, the inefficiencies, and even the dangers that darkness can cause. The greater the darkness, the less we are able to effectively function, and the more we are vulnerable to the dangers in our environment.

People in the ancient world were acutely aware of the hindrances and dangers accompanied by darkness, and thus also the benefits that light brings. Whereas we may seldom visit any place where light is unavailable, they had to tolerate times of relative, and sometimes complete, darkness. In contrast to the darkness, a city of a hill, with many lights lit within its walls, would have been visible many miles away, and certainly would

³² *Life Application*, p. 84.

have been a welcome sight. Likewise, a lamp in the home would have been very important, and elevated to more effectively illuminate the room.

Light is a common and positive metaphor in Scripture. Many professing Christians use light as a mystical metaphor, adopting almost an occult understanding of the term. This is unfortunate and unnecessary, since Scripture uses it in clear and definite ways. When used as a metaphor, light almost always has positive intellectual and moral connotations; correspondingly, when used as a metaphor, darkness almost always has negative intellectual and moral connotations.

For example, John writes, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:6-7). Whether one lives by the truth is designated by whether one walks in the light or in the darkness.

In our anti-intellectual age, some of those who readily recognize light and darkness as moral metaphors nevertheless fail to recognize them as intellectual metaphors as well. But Scripture itself frequently uses them this way. For example, 2 Corinthians 4:4 tells us that unbelievers cannot see the *light* of the gospel because their *minds* have been blinded – that is, they are intellectually blind.

For some perverse reason, some Christians insist that many unbelievers are highly intelligent, and by a blatant distortion of the biblical text, they construe verses like this one to convey only a moral blindness, as if morality is non-mental. What is morality but the mind's dispositions and decisions (often resulting in actions) in relation to the law of God? Contrary to them, Scripture teaches that unbelievers reject the gospel not only because they are morally defective, but because they are also intellectually defective. In plain language, this means that non-Christians are non-Christians because they are evil and stupid. This is what Scripture plainly and explicitly teaches. It is better for you to disagree with Scripture and admit it, than to disagree with Scripture and then lie about it.

With the above in mind, Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Even within the context of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount, Scripture says, "The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16). Simeon calls Jesus "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). Jesus is as a great light, showing us the way to salvation and freedom – the way out of the intellectual futility and moral depravity that continue to enslave all non-Christians.

Then, in addressing his followers, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). Now, it is clear that we are not the light of the world in exactly the same sense and to exactly the same degree as Christ. Paul writes, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light *in the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:8). We are light "in the Lord," so that our light is derivative and reflective, and does not come in and of ourselves.

In another place, Jesus says, "Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light" (John 12:36). The meaning is plain – Jesus is the light of the world, who dwelled on this earth for a little while, and those who trust in him become like him, that is, the sons of light. Again, the metaphor does not convey only moral connotations, but also intellectual ones: "The entrance of Christ into the life and heart enables the mind to become intelligent and intellectual."³³

As Psalm 36 says, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (v. 9). Apart from God's illumination, there can be no life and no light, and this is why I frequently emphasize the need to depend on Christ as the foundation of all our thinking, and to depend on Scripture as the first principle of our worldview (Colossians 2:8). In contrast, "The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going" (John 12:35). The non-Christian is stupid and evil – intellectually and morally, he has no idea what he is doing or where he is going.

Non-Christians vehemently deny that they are trapped in intellectual and moral darkness; rather, they boast of their spiritual enlightenment, scientific understanding, and moral progress. However, just as an insane person is not qualified to evaluate his own mental condition, the non-Christian mind is so darkened and damaged that it is unaware of its own dismal condition.

Non-Christians judge divine revelation by their human limitations. They claim that they are on a progressive pursuit for enlightenment in all areas of thought, that they are gaining in knowledge and revising their theories and principles. They further claim that the very fact that Scripture has remained the same for hundreds of years means that it must be outdated, and that the information in it must be false.

However, this loaded language is just an attempt to hide their ignorance, besides being an unintentional admission to intellectual incompetence.

First, they assume that they are indeed making progress, that they are getting better instead of getting worse. When it comes to science, they may indeed be making progress in terms of the practical effects that they are able to produce. However, in terms of the scientific theories that seek to describe and explain reality, although the scientists use much more complex language to express themselves today, their basic theories and assumptions have not progressed beyond those espoused by some of the ancient philosophers. If those philosophers were wrong then, the scientists are wrong now. And in areas where they have made real changes, we may argue that their new or revised theories are still false, that they have merely exchanged old errors for new ones.

Second, claiming that their progressive discovery is superior to Scripture's constant revelation presupposes that the Bible has been wrong from the beginning. If the Bible was wrong then, it is wrong now. But this also means that if the Bible was right from the beginning, then it has always been right, and it is right today. Contrary to their view that

³³ Walter L. Wilson, *A Dictionary of Bible Type*; Hendrickson Publishers, 1999; p. 259.

the Bible is outdated because it has been written for hundreds of years, we will say that because the Bible has set forth the truth since the beginning, this means that for hundreds of years non-Christians have been left behind in terms of knowledge about reality and morality, and they are no better today.

Some Christians are intimidated by the non-Christians' claim to intellectual and even spiritual enlightenment, but this is entirely unnecessary. Against their claim to progressive discovery, we can boldly respond, "Just because you are stupid does not mean that the Bible is wrong. Just because you need to constantly revise your theories does not mean that the Bible needs to be revised. Just because it takes you hundreds of years to produce so little of what you call progress does not mean that the Bible was not perfect from the very beginning. To refute the Bible, you must directly confront its claims. Human limitations are inapplicable to divine revelation; the argument from alleged progress is irrelevant and false."

Continuing with the metaphor, Jesus says, "Let your *light* shine before men, that they may see your *good deeds* and praise your Father in heaven." I have already mentioned that the metaphor of light often has intellectual and moral connotations. In this verse, to let our "light" shine means to let people see our "good deeds." What kind of good deeds is meant here? Within the context of the Sermon, these good deeds would certainly include exhibiting all the characteristics listed in the Beatitudes, as well as obeying all the commandments that Jesus expounds on in the coming sections. Therefore, we are to show mercy, make peace, and to obey God's commands regarding murder, adultery, divorce, swearing, and so forth.

When Paul uses light as a metaphor in Ephesians 5, he writes:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible... (v. 8-13)

To let our light shine includes displaying "all goodness, righteousness and truth," and to find out and do all that "pleases the Lord." It also includes refraining from the deeds of darkness, but beyond that, Paul tells us to "expose them."

Moreover, the "good deeds" Jesus mentions also include what some people may fail to consider, namely, that we are to shine as light by our preaching. As mentioned, the metaphor of light does not include only a moral dimension, but also an intellectual dimension, which is where preaching comes in.

Even within the Sermon, Jesus refers to one who both "practices *and teaches*" God's commandments as great in the kingdom of heaven (5:19). Acts 26:23 says that

"Christ...would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles," so that light is something that can be proclaimed instead of exhibited only by deeds and by example. Then, when the Jews reject the gospel in Acts 13, the apostles say to them:

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth'" (v. 46-47).

In other words, since the context clearly refers to preaching, by making them "a light for the Gentiles," God has not made them into mere moral examples, but also into preachers of the gospel. Elsewhere, Paul indicates that to "shine like stars in the universe" means not only to "become blameless and pure," but also to "hold out the word of life" (Philippians 2:15-16).

Thus the "good deeds" Jesus mentions refer to both our gospel preaching and our moral example. He adds that such good deeds should lead people to "praise your Father in heaven." This restricts the intended meaning and effect of the good deeds. If your so-called good deeds mainly draw attention and praise to yourself, then you have failed to shine as light and exhibit the good deeds to which Jesus refers. This also means that the good deeds do not include what the non-Christians may consider as good. Jesus is not commanding us to merely recycle our trash, to rescue strayed cats, or to save certain exotic or endangered animals, even though the world considers these things good and noble. Rather, Jesus is referring to deeds that Scripture defines as good, and that clearly exhibits your Christian identity; otherwise, how will people know to praise your Father in heaven?

Looking back to the passage from Ephesians 5, Paul teaches that as children of the light, not only do we shine as light, but corresponding to the very nature of light, we also expose the deeds of darkness. As he says elsewhere, "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:5). Unlike the non-Christians, "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 9). And this is also why the world hates us, because God has made us as different as light is to darkness, and because as "the people of the light" (Luke 16:8), we expose their beliefs and actions as evil, by our example and by our testimony.

Because non-Christians are as darkness, for Christians to shine as light means that they are to be the spiritual opposite of all the other people in the world. And because non-Christians are everywhere, darkness is everywhere, and this means that Christians must remain committed to stand their ground as the counter-culture, even as they are hated, threatened, and persecuted. Many Christians are intimidated by the pressure to conform to the world. However, Jesus says that just as one would not cover up a lamp, but would rather place it at an elevated position to maximize its effectiveness, Christians should not

retreat from the world, but should rather let their light shine before the world, so that the church may be as a city on a hill, its brilliance visible from many miles away.

We live in a day when many churches are eagerly conforming to the beliefs and practices of this world, some even claiming to do this in the name of Christ. However, those who follow this trend cannot function as salt and light, because the metaphors themselves depend on making a distinction between the church and the world, and between believers and unbelievers.

There are those who try to convince us that the church is to fulfill its mission by losing its flavor and hiding its light, as if we will convert the world by becoming non-Christians ourselves. Ever since the Tower of Babel, the enemies of God have been trying to unite humanity, not for the sake of true worship, but for the sake of superficial peace and comfort at the expense of true worship. Contrary to this mentality, Jesus teaches, "Let *your* light shine before men, that *they* may see your good deeds"; he encourages precisely the "we versus they" thinking that the world so opposes.

The two metaphors cover both the negative and the positive aspects of Christian influence. Salt is primarily a negative metaphor by which Jesus warns his followers against being neutralized by the world's influence. Light is primarily a positive metaphor by which Jesus tells us followers to actively exert their Christian influence on this world. The first metaphor tells Christians that they are a force to hinder the spread of evil; the second one tells them that they are a force to promote the spread of truth. The former warns disciples against conforming to the world; the latter warns them against withdrawing from the world. One warns believers against secularism, and the other warns believers against isolationism.

As Christians, our influence is powerful and universal. Jesus says that we are "the salt of *the earth*" and "the light of *the world*." The Christian faith is powerful to preserve and transform every people group and every aspect of society. Whereas non-Christian religions and philosophies are constantly revising their beliefs and theories in their desperate attempts to maintain the illusion of being relevant, the Christian faith has always been and always will be relevant. And because Christ is relevant at any time and in any culture, so are we.

2. THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS

LAW (Matthew 5:17-20)

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Despite the clear and direct teaching of Christ on the subject, very few people understand and affirm the proper view concerning the present authority and relevance of the Old Testament. Because they misunderstand some of the teachings in the New Testament, and because they fail to grasp the general structure of biblical revelation, many people hold to some very destructive ideas about the place of the Old Testament, particularly as it relates to Christians today.

For example, some believe that Christ has abolished the Old Testament, so that its teachings are no longer directly relevant to Christians, and that its contents can serve illustrative purposes at best. Others believe that various parts of Scripture pertain to different "dispensations," so that the principles and teachings addressing previous dispensations no longer apply to those who live in our present dispensation.

Still others believe that Christ came to give us a new commandment, namely, the commandment to walk in love. They believe that this commandment then replaces the Old Testament commandments, including the Ten Commandments. Some people from this group believe that if one walks in love, he will never break the Ten Commandments; nevertheless, the Ten Commandments themselves have been abolished, so that rather than consciously obeying them, we should just walk in love. But there are others from this group who believe that walking in love will sometimes entail breaking the Ten Commandments, but since the Ten Commandments have been abolished, it is no longer sinful to break them, that is, as long as one breaks them for the sake of love.

Then, there are even those who believe that since Christ himself lived under the Old Testament, some of the things that he taught are now irrelevant for Christians, including the Lord's Prayer. Others go as far as to teach that under the Old Testament, God's people were saved by obeying the law, whereas under the New Testament, they are saved by believing in Christ. But Paul says that *no one* has ever been saved by obeying the law,

and indeed the law was never given for salvation. Rather, salvation has always come by grace, that is, when God chooses to save a person and gives him the gift of faith.

Jesus himself encountered similar misunderstandings during his ministry. This was not because he taught against the Old Testament; rather, as we will see in a moment, the very opposite was true. One problem was that the Jewish religious authorities had added so many human traditions to the law of God, that when Jesus opposed and disobeyed these traditions, people mistook him as opposing and disobeying the law itself.

Against their misconceptions, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." By "the Law" and "the Prophets," Jesus here includes all that the Jewish people regarded as Scripture, that is, what we now call the Old Testament. He denies that he has come to abolish the Old Testament; rather, he has come to fulfill it.

It is likely that Jesus has in mind the following meanings when he uses the word "fulfill." First, he means that he has come to fully expound the law against human traditions and misinterpretations, so that God's demands may be truly known, and that God's people may learn and obey the full and intended meaning of the law. Second, he means that he has come to fully perform the true requirements of the law. That is, he has come as one born under the law to fully obey the law, so that he may be a perfect redeemer for his people. Third, he means that he has come to fully fulfill the prophecies in the law concerning the Messiah. That is, all that the law says about the Christ would be fulfilled in him.

Although many commentators, as I do, mention and affirm that Jesus fulfills the law in all three senses, some commentators suggest that, even if it is true that Jesus fulfills the law in all three sense, Jesus intends only the third sense when he uses the word "fulfill." They observe how Jesus says in the next verse that nothing in the law shall disappear until everything is "accomplished," which seems to indicate that by "fulfill," he means that what the law says will finally happen in the person of Christ.

By using the word "accomplished," although verse 18 certainly affirms the third sense of fulfillment, it does not automatically exclude the other two senses. In fact, by affirming the third sense, the second sense must also be included, because the second sense is really subsumed under the third sense. That is, by affirming that what the law says concerning the Messiah would be fulfilled in Jesus (the third sense), we automatically affirm that Jesus would perform all the requirements of the law (the second sense). As Hebrews 10:7 says, "Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, O God."

As for the first sense, that Jesus has come to "fulfill" the law by fully expounding its meanings, demands, and implications, verse 19 says that one who "practices and teaches" the commands of the law is great in the kingdom of heaven, and verse 20 refers to a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees. After this comes a lengthy exposition in which Jesus opposes and corrects the false teachings and practices of the Pharisees and

Jewish leaders. Therefore, we are justified in saying that when Jesus says he has come to "fulfill" the law, he intends to convey all the above three senses.

Again, Jesus says that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law. Thus our starting premise must be that no matter what position we take regarding the law, it cannot be that Jesus has abolished it. If there is to be any change when it comes to the relationship between God's people and God's law, it must be understood in the context of its fulfillment and not its nullification.

This is important in explaining why we have ceased observing the ceremonial aspects of the law. Several New Testament passages have been construed by people to say that Christ's coming has indeed abolished the law along with all its commandments. However, whatever these passages are saying, they cannot be understood as nullifying the law. As we have observed, Jesus says in verses 17 and 18 that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law. Then, verse 19 says that one who practices and teaches the commandments in the law is called great in the kingdom of heaven.

The truth is not difficult to understand. In Ephesians 2:14, Paul mentions that there was a "barrier" or "dividing wall of hostility" between the Jews and the Gentiles. What was this barrier or dividing wall? In verses 11-13, Paul writes:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

The barrier or dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentiles consisted of the external ceremonies and regulations that God commanded the Jews to keep, so that the Jews were called "the circumcision" and the Gentiles were called the "uncircumcised." Paul is careful to specify that by circumcision, here he refers to only that which was "done in the body by the hands of men."

Elsewhere he explains that not all those who were outwardly circumcised were saved, but only those who were inwardly circumcised, so that not all Jews were saved, but only the elect upon whom God himself sovereignly performed the "circumcision of the heart" (Romans 2:29). And although relatively few Gentiles were saved up to that time, God did save some of them, having performed this same inward circumcision upon them.

Again, this barrier or dividing wall consisted of external ceremonies and regulations, and it is precisely this barrier or wall that Jesus abolished. As Paul writes, "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations"

(Ephesians 2:14-15). "The law with its commandments *and* regulations" in the NIV is a misleading translation. The more literal NASB says, "The Law of commandments *contained in* ordinances," and the HCSB says, "The law of the commandments *in* regulations" (see also the KJV and NKJV).

Hebrews 9:10 says, "They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order." What are the things that have been stopped because of Christ's coming? What are the things that applied "until the time of the new order"? Certainly not the entire law or the entire Old Testament and its commandments, but only the "external regulations," namely, those things that are "a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings" (see Mark 7:19 and Acts 10:9-16).

Elsewhere, Paul explains, "These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:17). In other words, these ceremonies and regulations have ceased not because they have somehow become false, but because their very purpose was to prefigure Christ, and since Christ has come, these ceremonies and regulations have been fulfilled, and remained fulfilled in Christ. That is, those who observed them looked forward to Christ through them. But since Christ has come, to continue observing these ceremonies and regulations would imply ignorance and unbelief, as if Christ has not yet come.

Yet, even the Old Testament passages regarding these ceremonies and regulations have not become useless, but they remain instructive concerning God's plan of salvation, the work of Christ, and the various doctrines that they prefigure and illustrate, as demonstrated by the letter to the Hebrews and in the letters of Paul. John MacArthur writes as follows:

For example, all the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law were fulfilled in Christ and are no longer to be observed by Christians (Col. 2:16, 17). Yet not one jot or tittle is thereby erased; the underlying truths of those Scriptures remain – and in fact the mysteries behind them are now revealed in the brightest light of the gospel.³⁴

Therefore, God's people have ceased observing these ceremonies and regulations, not that they have become false, but because they have become true at the coming of Christ. For example, we have no animal sacrifices at church not because there is no need for a sacrifice, but because Christ is our once-for-all and all-sufficient sacrifice.

However, this point concerning the ceremonies and regulations do not at all apply to the moral commandments of God, such as the Ten Commandments. Just because Christ has come does not mean that we may now worship idols and commit murder. As I have already mentioned, Matthew 5:19 says that we should continue to practice and to teach the commandments written in the Law and the Prophets.

³⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1997; p. 1400.

Some people claim that although we may not worship idols, commit murder, and the like, these restrictions exist not because the Ten Commandments are still in force, but because we are now under the law of love, and love forbids us to do these things. However, what we have said above already refutes this claim. Moreover, the statement, "Love your neighbor as yourself," does not originate in the Gospels, but it comes from Leviticus 19:18. And it was Moses who *repeatedly* said, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5), which is "the first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:38) in *both* the Old and the New Testaments.

As for the Ten Commandments, Paul says that they are merely summarized by the commandment to love, so that love is by no means an altogether different commandment: "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and *whatever other commandment* there may be, are *summed up* in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Romans 13:9). In fact, this means that love itself is defined by these various commandments, and that it is undefined without them. He concludes, "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (v. 10).

In other words, you walk in love by obeying all these commandments, and thus if you walk in love, you have fulfilled the requirements of the law. "It is a great mistake, then, to think that Jesus abolished the commandments and taught us that 'all you need is love.' For love *means* fulfilling the law (Rom. 13:10)."³⁵ This is not an isolated or obscure teaching, nor is it difficult to grasp, so it is strange that so many people miss it altogether. The greatness of the new covenant is not that God no longer requires you to obey the law, but that he *enables* you to obey the law: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds" (Hebrews 10:16). "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (Romans 3:31).

In verse 17, Jesus denies that he has come to abolish the law, but rather to fulfill it. Then, in verse 18, he further affirms the law's inspiration and authority. He says, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." Some commentators believe that the words "until heaven and earth disappear" constitute an eschatological expression pointing to the end of the existing order, but this is probably not the best interpretation. Jesus is not telling us when, or even if, the law will pass away; rather, his emphasis is on the permanence and the inevitable fulfillment of all that the law teaches. Thus R. T. France writes, "The expression is probably less a specific note of time than an idiom for something inconceivable."³⁶

Jesus expresses the highest view of Scripture, saying that "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen" in the law shall disappear or fail to be accomplished. The Greek for "the smallest letter" is *iota*, referring to the smallest letter of the Hebrews alphabet *yod*,

³⁵ Ferguson, p. 74.

³⁶ France, p. 115.

which is almost as small as a comma, like an apostrophe or an accent mark. "The least stroke of a pen" (*keraiā*) refers to one of the tiny hooks and projections that distinguish some Hebrew letters from others, like the serif in modern typefaces.

In short, Jesus asserts that all of Scripture is inspired, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative *to the letter*. Therefore, the proper view of biblical inerrancy affirms not only the general events and doctrines taught in Scripture, but it affirms that God has infallibly caused to be written the very words and the very letters used in the Bible. To deny this or to affirm anything short of this is to call Jesus a liar.

For this reason, I have serious reservations about Article 19 of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The Article begins with an affirmation: "We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. We further affirm that such confession should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ." Of course I do not object to this portion, but then the Article follows with a denial: "We deny that such confession is necessary for salvation. However, we further deny that inerrancy can be rejected without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the church."

In the official commentary on the Statement, R. C. Sproul further clarifies the denial, and writes:

The denial in Article XIX is very important. The framers of the confession are saying unambiguously that confession of belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is not an essential of the Christian faith necessary for salvation. We gladly acknowledge that people who do not hold to this doctrine may be earnest and genuine, zealous, and in many ways dedicated Christians. We do not regard acceptance of inerrancy to be a test for salvation.³⁷

Although Sproul claims that the Article intends to be unambiguous, its precise meaning is still unclear to me. It seems that there are several possible meanings to the Article and Sproul's exposition:

1. *Without* some definite knowledge Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *implicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.
2. *With* some definite knowledge Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *implicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.
3. *Without* some definite knowledge Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *explicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.

³⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy*; International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980; p. 56.

4. *With* some definite knowledge Scripture's own claim to inerrancy, one may *explicitly* reject this doctrine and still be a Christian.

It is unclear what Sproul means by "people who *do not hold* to this doctrine." Is he referring to those who simply neglect to affirm this doctrine, or also to those who consciously reject this doctrine? Although Sproul and the Article do not address this question clearly enough, it is almost certain that they mean the latter, since the Article says, "We further deny that inerrancy can be *rejected* without grave consequences, both to the individual and to the church." That is, the framers were thinking of those who *reject* the doctrine, and not just those who neglect to affirm it, such as those who have never considered the subject.

In other words, Sproul and the Article appear to affirm all of the four propositions. If this is indeed the case, then I strongly disagree with them. Instead, we should reject at least the final proposition.

We have established from Matthew 5:19 that Jesus held to the highest view of Scripture, affirming that Scripture is inspired, inerrant, and infallible to the letter. Now, if after clearly making this point clear to a person, and he still rejects biblical inerrancy, the necessary implication is that this person believes that Jesus himself made a mistake on this issue. However, if salvation demands an explicit profession of the deity and lordship of Jesus Christ, then it is inconsistent for a professing Christian to confess the deity and lordship of Christ but at the same time charge him with error or even dishonesty.

In other words, it is impossible to profess Christ as Lord and liar at the same time, so that an explicit affirmation of Christ as Lord is also an implicit affirmation of biblical inerrancy, and an explicit denial of biblical inerrancy is also an implicit denial of Christ as Lord.

I am not saying that a person must explicitly affirm biblical inerrancy to be a Christian. Perhaps the person has never considered the subject. Perhaps he is unaware that Christ, the apostles, and the prophets insisted on biblical inerrancy. Or, perhaps he has been mistaught. Under these circumstances, I grant that it is possible for one to be a genuine Christian with an effective profession of Christ without affirming biblical inerrancy.

However, once a person has been confronted with the numerous passages in which Christ, the apostles, and the prophets insist on biblical inerrancy, he may no longer plead ignorance, nor may we think that he has never considered the subject. Rather, he must now explicitly affirm or reject biblical inerrancy, and thus implicitly affirm or reject the integrity and authority of Jesus Christ.

Once a person knows that the Scripture claims to be inspired, inerrant, and infallible, if he rejects the doctrine of inerrancy, but still claims to believe the gospel, then this can only mean that his faith rests on his own opinion and judgment, and not on the promise of God as revealed in Scripture. Rather than trusting God's revelation, this person stands in

judgment over it, affirming portions of it while rejecting other parts, so that his faith ultimately rests in himself, not God's power and wisdom. But then, is this person's faith still real, or has it been exposed as false? If you believe that Jesus is wrong when he talks about Scripture, then on what basis other than your own opinion and preference, or some other standard external to Scripture, can you believe that Jesus is right when he talks about salvation?

To use a random example to illustrate what I mean, I can explicitly affirm biblical inerrancy without explicitly affirming or denying the proposition, "Jehoshaphat lived in Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 19:4). This is because I may not know about the verse. However, since the proposition is contained in the Bible, my explicit affirmation of biblical inerrancy is also an implicit affirmation of 2 Chronicles 19:4.

But if someone now confronts me with 2 Chronicles 19:4, and I explicitly reject the verse, then this must necessarily imply that my initial explicit affirmation of biblical inerrancy was a lie – that is, I did not in fact believe in biblical inerrancy.

In the same way, a person may explicitly affirm Christ as Lord without explicitly affirming or denying biblical inerrancy. This is probably because he has never considered the subject, or because he has never been confronted with the relevant biblical passages. However, his explicit affirmation of Christ as Lord is also an implicit affirmation of all that Christ has said. And since Christ has asserted biblical inerrancy, this person's explicit affirmation of Christ as Lord is also an implicit affirmation of biblical inerrancy.

But if someone now confronts him with Christ's assertions on biblical inerrancy, and he explicitly rejects them, then this must necessarily imply that his initial explicit affirmation of Christ as Lord (which implies an affirmation of what Christ affirms, namely, biblical inerrancy) was also false.

If he claims that Scripture's teachings about Christ's redemptive work are true, whereas its teachings about Christ's assertions on biblical inerrancy are false, then this person is obviously using his own opinion and preference, or some other standard external to the Bible, to judge God's revelation. This in turn means that his faith is false, since it rests only on his own opinion and preference, and not on God's promise as recorded in Scripture.

The inevitable conclusion, it seems, is that no one who has been clearly confronted with Christ's teaching on biblical inerrancy can reject biblical inerrancy and still legitimately claim to be a Christian. However, Sproul and the Chicago Statement appear to teach the opposite, which is why we must disagree with them.

Sproul is known for affirming and defending The Westminster Confession of Faith, but in the very chapter where the Confession discusses "Saving Faith," it says, "By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true *whatsoever is revealed in the Word*, for the authority of God Himself speaketh therein" (14.2).

To be precise, it does not say, "If you are a Christian, or if you have this faith, then you will surely believe all that is written in Scripture," but I seriously doubt that the Confession intends to leave room for unbelief, as in, "If you are a Christian, then God has given you the faith by which to believe all that is written in Scripture, even if you do not in fact believe it." That is, it seems clear that the Confession is referring an actual (even if sometimes implicit) belief in Scripture, and not merely a potential belief that can explicitly reject any part of Scripture.

The following quotations from several commentaries on the Confession agree with this understanding:

As faith, in general, is an assent to truth upon testimony, so divine faith is an assent to divine truth upon divine testimony. Saving faith, therefore, includes an assent of the heart to all the truths revealed in the Word of God, whether they relate to the law or to the gospel; and that, not upon the testimony of any man or Church, nor because they appear agreeable to the dictates of natural reason, but on the ground of the truth and authority of God himself, speaking in the Scriptures, and evidencing themselves, by their own distinguishing light and power, to the mind. (Robert Shaw)³⁸

...a picking and choosing from among all the biblical details shows that these so-called conservatives are using a criterion of truth other than the Bible itself....In other words, they do not accept any verse in the Bible "for the authority of God himself speaking therein." If they accepted even one verse on God's authority, they would believe "to be true *whatsoever* is revealed in the Word," that is, all of it. For the Bible is the Word of God, as Chapter 1 said, and God speaks the truth....the Confession says that saving faith accepts everything that is revealed in the Word... (Gordon H. Clark)³⁹

The general effect of the Spirit's work is to produce faith in **WHATEVER IS REVEALED IN THE WORD**...The Roman Catholic doctrine of *implicit faith* teaches that Catholics accept all that their church officially teaches implicitly, even before they learn what it is. This is a travesty of the true doctrine here presented in the *Westminster Confession* – regenerate Christians have faith in the word of God, not in the word of men. Implicit

³⁸ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*; Christian Focus Publications, 1998; p. 193.

³⁹ Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965; p. 148-149.

faith in the Scripture is actually what the Spirit works in the hearts of the elect. (Gerstner, Kelly, and Rollinson)⁴⁰

Saving faith receives as true all the contents of God's Word, without exception....the whole must be received as equally the Word of God, and must in all its parts be accepted with equal faith. The same illumination of the understanding and renewal of the affections which lays the foundation for the soul's acting faith in any one portion of God's testimony, lays the same foundation for its acting faith in every other portion. The whole Word of God, therefore, as far as known to the individual, to the exclusion of all traditions, doctrines of men, or pretended private revelations, is the object of saving faith. (A. A. Hodge)⁴¹

On this point, I fully agree with the Confession and the above commentaries. This chapter in the Confession addresses *saving* faith, and not mature faith, perfect faith, or some other kind of faith; it is talking about the kind of faith that any real Christian should have. Therefore, since Sproul has previously affirmed the Westminster Confession, he contradicts himself in also affirming Article 19 of the Chicago Statement and in his exposition of the Article.⁴²

The church should confront those who deny biblical inerrancy, showing them those biblical passages that affirm and teach biblical inerrancy, and showing them that an informed rejection of biblical inerrancy also constitutes a rejection of Christ.

Then, since an informed rejection of biblical inerrancy also constitutes a rejection of Christ, those who continue to reject biblical inerrancy after careful and repeated confrontations by the church should be excommunicated. The church should regard their profession of Christ as insincere and false, and thus treat them as unbelievers and expel them from the covenant community.

This biblical proposal may shock and even anger some church leaders and members. However, what should be more shocking and infuriating is how many churches would rightly expel those who commit sin and refuse to repent, especially after repeated warnings and confrontations, but then these same churches would continue to embrace those who deny biblical inerrancy, when biblical inerrancy is the very basis upon which they expel the other unrepentant offenders.

While we are on the subject, I might as well point out that the church leaders who refuse to deal with those who reject biblical inerrancy should be removed from office. Of

⁴⁰ John H. Gerstner, Douglas F. Kelly, and Philip Rollinson, *A Guide to The Westminster Confession of Faith*; Summertown Texts, 1992; p. 72.

⁴¹ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998 (original: 1869); p. 205-206.

⁴² I will not claim to know why Sproul commits this error. Judging from what I know about him, and to be charitable about the matter, I am guessing that it is because he has not sufficiently considered the necessary implications of Article 19, and not because of any blatant unbelief or serious doctrinal error on his part.

course, many churches prefer to please men rather than to please God; they prefer human-centered harmony rather than God-centered purity, and thus heretics and apostates remain and continue to vex these churches, that is, until God either awakens or judges them.

Article 19 of the Chicago Statement and Sproul's exposition of it amount to an official and public declaration that belief in biblical inerrancy is optional. It is true that the Article warns about the "grave consequences" of rejecting biblical inerrancy, but how grave can these consequences be, when the official exposition of this Article says, "We gladly acknowledge that people do not hold to this doctrine may be earnest and genuine, zealous and in many ways dedicated Christians"?

They do not assert this reluctantly or grudgingly, but *gladly*. As for the description, "earnest and genuine, zealous and in many ways dedicated," even those Christians who *do* affirm biblical inerrancy often do not deserve such commendation. Sproul's exposition thus officially and publicly assures those who reject biblical inerrancy that the consequences are never so grave as to entail damnation. In fact, "in many ways," these individuals can be very good Christians without affirming the doctrine. Against this blatant disrespect for what Scripture teaches on the subject, we must instead insist that biblical inerrancy is nonnegotiable; it is not optional.

Since Christ comes not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and since Scripture is infallible and authoritative to the letter, God still requires all people to obey the Old Testament commandments, and those who teach otherwise are opposing Christ's authority and agenda. Thus Jesus says in verse 19, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

The word translated "breaks" in the NIV means to loosen, so that "relaxes" (ESV) is probably a better translation. The idea here may include breaking the commandments, but in keeping with the context of the passage, the word also suggests the reason for breaking them. That is, Jesus opposes those who relaxes the commandments and so to break them. Moreover, he also opposes those who then teach other people this loose view of the commandments.

Contrary to what many professing Christians think and teach today, Jesus not only refuses to abolish the law's commandments, but he does not even relax them. Many Christians speak as if those who *uphold* the least of God's commandments will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus teaches exactly the opposite.⁴³

⁴³ I have already explained why we have stopped observing the ceremonies and regulations in the Old Testament, and how that it is consistent with what I am saying now.

People often object that teaching strict obedience to the commandments is to teach legalism; however, this is to misunderstand the nature of legalism.⁴⁴ The legalism that Scripture opposes commits one or both of the following errors. First, legalism teaches one to attain righteousness by works, in order to merit salvation. Second, legalism teaches obedience to human traditions in addition to or even instead of God's commandments, as if those traditions carry the same or even greater authority than the word of God.

In other words, a legalistic person is not one who obeys God's commandments, but he is precisely one who undermines and disobeys them. A legalistic person, or a legalist, is not someone who follows God's commands too much or too carefully, as if that is possible, but he is precisely someone who does not follow them nearly enough, even if he claims otherwise.

Many people are fond of teaching people to walk in love in opposition to legalism, but most of them do not understand what legalism is. Instead of teaching people to obey God, legalism teaches them to disobey God in the ways explained above. On the other hand, to teach people to walk in love is to teach them to truly and fully obey God's commands: "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:3); "Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10).

But if we teach obedience to the Law and the Prophets, does this not undermine or contradict the doctrine of justification by faith? This reflects a misunderstanding of the Old Testament. Paul writes, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:21-22). In other words, justification by faith is an *Old Testament* teaching – it has *always* been the way God saves his people (Hebrews 11).

Therefore, when we teach people to obey God's commandments, we do not undermine or contradict justification by faith, because we are not telling them to obey the law *so that* they may be saved. Rather, since no one can perfectly obey the law, the preaching of God's righteous requirements drives sinners to desperation. We then preach the gospel to them and call them to faith and repentance, *so that* they may then obey the law. That is, we do not tell them to obey the law so that they may be saved, but we tell them to be saved (by faith in Christ) so that they may obey the law (Jeremiah 31:33; Ephesians 2:10). Therefore, the Law and the Prophets by no means undermine or contradict justification by faith, but instead constitute its very foundation. And to live under grace does not mean that you do not need to keep the law; you *must* keep the law, only that it is not for salvation.

⁴⁴ *Merriam-Webster* defines legalism as, "strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code." This reflects the popular usage, which is probably what a dictionary is supposed to tell us. However, this definition is certainly inadequate if used in the context of theological discussions. For example, ignoring other problems with this definition for now, is there such a thing as *excessive* conformity to God's law, as in obeying God too much? I would expect greater precision from scholars that compile an authoritative dictionary like the *Merriam-Webster*. In any case, what we are trying to establish is what those people in Scripture whom we often call legalistic (e.g. the Pharisees) were doing wrong. Our conclusion will contradict the popular usage, and thus the dictionary definition.

Verse 19 warns against relaxing even the least of the commandments and then teaching others to do the same, but it commends one who "practices *and* teaches" them. "He is saying that our attitude to the law of God is an index of our attitude to God himself,"⁴⁵ so that "greatness in the kingdom of God will be measured by conformity to it."⁴⁶ Both the negative and the positive aspects of this verse show that God is not satisfied even if your own view of the commandments is correct, and that you are obeying them. Rather, he is also concerned about what you tell others about these commandments. Personal obedience to God's commandments is incomplete – you must also teach others to obey them.

Many Christians think that to fulfill "The Great Commission" mainly means to "preach the gospel," but their concept of the gospel and our mandate is often too narrow. Jesus says that we are to go into the nations, "*teaching* them to *obey everything* I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19). This and nothing less is the Great Commission.

Our conclusion is that the whole Bible is one enduring and authoritative book, to be studied and obeyed by everyone, and those who teach the Bible must teach it this way. "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52).

After considering the above, verse 20 may come as a great surprise to some people, for Jesus continues to say, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." The Pharisees are members of a largely lay movement supposedly dedicated to the faithful observance of the law, and "the teachers of the law," or the scribes, are the professional teachers and students of the law.

Now, if it requires a righteousness superior to that of the Pharisees and the scribes just to be a member of God's kingdom, this necessarily implies that the Pharisees and the scribes themselves are not admitted. That is, the Pharisees and the scribes are unsaved and damned. As Jesus says to them elsewhere, "How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33).

The question is, since Jesus urges obedience to even the least of God's commandments, should he not rather commend the Pharisees and the scribes, and set them up as examples for everyone? Are not the Pharisees and the scribes those who most faithfully uphold the commandments? Do they not insist on the most precise understanding and the most meticulous obedience to the law? Are they not supreme examples of those who practice and teach the commandments (v.19), so that they should be called great in the kingdom of heaven?

⁴⁵ Ferguson, p. 77.

⁴⁶ Stott, p. 74.

Of course, the Pharisees and the scribes think of themselves this way, and they manage to convince many others that they are indeed supreme examples of obedience to God's commandments, so that long ago it was even said, "If only two men are allowed to enter heaven, then one will certainly be a teacher of the law and the other a Pharisee."⁴⁷

Since this is how the people perceive the Pharisees and the scribes, verse 20 would be especially shocking to them. It would seem that the Pharisees and the scribes are doing exactly what verse 19 demands. Jesus here corrects this great misconception, telling the people that although the Pharisees and the scribes claim to be obedient to the law, and even appear so to the people, theirs is a false righteousness that disobeys and subverts God's commandments.

Some people may misinterpret the kind of righteousness in view here, and say, "Perhaps Jesus is referring to the imputed righteousness that one receives by faith. No matter how much one tries to obey the commandments, he can never obey them perfectly. However, Jesus obeyed them perfectly on our behalf, and when we believe the gospel, we become identified with him, so that God credits his perfect righteousness to us." Although it is true that we are saved only by the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and not by what righteousness we can attain by obeying the law, Jesus is not referring to imputed righteousness when he says that we must have a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes.

Earlier in this book, we have already seen that Matthew refers to a righteousness that satisfies the requirements of God's law in terms of actual good works and behavior. I will quickly summarize several points here. Matthew 3:15 records that Christ submitted to baptism "to fulfill all righteousness." Matthew 5:10 refers to those who are persecuted because of their righteousness. Matthew 5:19 refers to one who "practices and teaches" the commandments. Immediately after Matthew 5:20, the verse under discussion, Jesus proceeds to expound on the proper understanding of several commandments and what it means to obey them. Matthew 6:1 then mentions "acts of righteousness" that the hypocrites love to perform before men to be praised by them.

Therefore, in Matthew 5:20, when Jesus says that those who enter the kingdom of heaven must exhibit a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes, he is not referring to an imputed righteousness (although it is this kind of righteousness that alone can save us), but he is referring to a righteousness characterized by an actual personal obedience and conformity to God's commandments.

Again, this does not undermine or contradict at all the doctrine of justification by faith, since we are not talking about justification here. Rather, Jesus merely asserts that those who enter the kingdom of heaven must have a righteousness that surpasses the false righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes.

The Scripture teaches that it is precisely by first receiving the imputed righteousness by faith in conversion that we then receive the ability to actually and personally obey God's

⁴⁷ Ferguson, p. 76.

commands: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Can it be any clearer? When God saves and converts us, he gives us his Spirit, who then moves us to obey his commands. Thus we are not saved because we obey, but we obey because we are saved.

Now, the Pharisees and the scribes are legalists, in both of the ways explained earlier. That is, they seek to attain a sufficient righteousness by their works. The problem is that God requires a perfect righteousness, which they can never achieve. Also, they do not go about establishing their own righteousness by truly obeying God's laws; rather, they have constructed an elaborate system of human traditions permitting them to disobey God's commandments altogether while still giving people the impression of supreme piety.

When interpreting and applying God's commandments, they find ways to get away with as much as possible, but more than that, they redefine the terms and heap up traditions in such a manner as to do away with having to obey the plain demand of the commandments altogether. This is why Jesus says elsewhere, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (Mark 7:9).

In the passages immediately following verse 20, Jesus will give us a number of examples on how God's commands have been distorted and subverted, and what it really means to obey them. As Stott rightly observes:

What the scribes and the Pharisees were doing, in order to make obedience more readily attainable, was to restrict the commandments and extend the permissions of the law. They made the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive. What Jesus did was to reverse both tendencies. He insisted instead that the full implications of God's commandments must be accepted without imposing any artificial limits, whereas the limits which God had set to his permissions must also be accepted and not arbitrarily increased.⁴⁸

Nowadays, many people have the misconception that Jesus condemns the Pharisees and the scribes because they are too meticulous in studying and obeying God's laws. They think that a strict and precise application of God's laws constitutes legalism. Precisely the opposite is true. The Pharisees and the scribes – commonly considered legalists – are the ones who relax God's commandments and teach others to do the same. In contrast, Jesus calls his followers to exhibit a genuine righteousness by *truly* practicing and teaching God's laws and their various implications (v. 19). What all this entails is explained in the upcoming sections.

⁴⁸ Stott, p. 79.

MURDER (Matthew 5:21-26)

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

Jesus calls his followers to exhibit a righteousness superior to that of the Pharisees and the scribes. Instead of relaxing the strict demands of the law, the superior and true righteousness is one that truly practices and teaches even the least of God's commands (v. 19). The Pharisees claim that they obey the law with precision, and the scribes claim that they teach it with precision, but in reality both of them attempt to cheat the law by redefining and reinterpreting its true intent and meaning.

That is, they distort and restrict the law in such a way that sin has been redefined so that it refers only to things that they have not done. Thus they avoid sin by redefining it, and not by obeying the law. With this in mind, it is easy to see why the true followers of God must have a superior righteousness, for the Pharisees and the scribes are not truly righteous at all.

Jesus now begins to give several examples of common misinterpretations and misapplications of God's commands, and in the process also provides his own correct interpretations and applications (v. 21-48).

He begins each section by saying, "You have heard that it was said."⁴⁹ It is possible that Jesus here uses or alludes to a rabbinical teaching method, in which the rabbi would begin with a similar expression, and then proceeds to give a false but seemingly possible interpretation of Scripture, after which he would refute the error and provide what he considers the correct understanding of the passage under discussion.

In any case, Jesus is certainly not contradicting the Old Testament commandments in these passages, since he has just finished saying that he has not come to abolish but to fulfill them, and that his disciples should practice and teach them. Then, he begins giving

⁴⁹ The passage on divorce (v. 31-32) begins with "It has been said," possibly because this section is part of or an extension of the previous section on adultery (v. 27-30). In any case, what we observe about how he begins the other sections also applies here.

these examples immediately after saying that one must have a righteousness superior to that of the Pharisees and the scribes.

Therefore, the context demands the understanding that Jesus is contradicting how the Pharisees and the scribes practice and teach these commandments, and not the commandments themselves. So instead of saying, "It is written," as is his custom for introducing a direct quotation from Scripture, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said." Rather than coming to replace the commandments, Jesus has come to restore and reinforce the commandments in the people's lives.

With this in mind, whether the correct translation should be "*to* the people long ago" or "*by* the people long ago" in verse 21 cannot damage the point we are making here. Nevertheless, there are strong arguments showing that the latter is correct, and if so, Jesus may be referring to the oral traditions of the Jewish rabbis and elders that have been adopted by the Pharisees and the scribes.

The first example that Jesus uses is the sixth commandment, which forbids murder: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'" But what is murder? May I beat a man until he is almost dead and still claim that I have not violated the sixth commandment? What if instead of killing a person, I hire someone to do it for me? Am I still guilty of murder? Or, what if, seething with anger and resentment, I wish that someone were dead, but I lack the means or the audacity to make it happen? Does this mean that I am still innocent of breaking the sixth commandment?

Legalistic people like the Pharisees and the scribes tend to restrict God's commandments so that they refer only to the most obvious and outrageous acts of wickedness. Thus although they would not kill Jesus themselves, they wish to have him killed, and conspire to make it happen. By their false definition and interpretation, they could still claim to be innocent of murder.

Jesus corrects this illegitimate restriction of God's law, and says, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." This is not a correction or even an extension of the sixth commandment; rather, he is stating what the sixth commandment truly means.

This understanding of the sixth commandment has never been obscure or hidden prior to this exposition by Jesus. Through Moses, God prohibited more than murder in the sense of the actual, deliberate, and unwarranted termination of human life. Moses wrote that anger had a prominent role in the very first murder, when Cain killed his brother Abel. God told Cain that his anger would be the root of sin, and told him to "master it" (Genesis 4:5-8).

In Leviticus, God says through Moses, "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life" (Leviticus 19:16). This is sufficient to show that God does not forbid only

actual murder, but that he forbids doing anything that even endangers another person's life. Then, the very next verse says, "Do not hate your brother in your heart" (v. 17), and the verse after that says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 18).

This shows that God never intended for his commandments to forbid only what we usually think of as murder. From the very beginning, his commandments address our daily practices relating to other people's safety, and beyond that, they address our very thoughts and motives, even forbidding us to "hate your brother" or to "bear a grudge." Therefore, instead of correcting or adding to God's law, Jesus is removing the false restrictions imposed by the Pharisees and the scribes upon God's law, and drawing out its original and complete meaning.

Some people try to distinguish between the offenses and the punishments in verse 22, and even suggest that there is a gradation with "the fire of hell" as the climax. However, commentators do not favor this interpretation; instead, it appears that Jesus is repeating essentially the same idea to communicate his point, that is, God's law does not forbid only physical and actual murder, but also illegitimate and personal anger, contempt, and insults. I say that the teaching speaks against only illegitimate and personal anger and insults, because Scripture teaches that some anger and insults are righteous and justified.

Within the context of the verse, the teaching refers to "anyone who is angry with his brother," but there is such a thing as righteous anger. For example, in Mark 3, Jesus asks the people, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (v. 4). But the people remain silent, so that they can watch whether Jesus would break, not God's law, but their traditions about the Sabbath. Thus Jesus looks around "in anger," because of "their stubborn hearts" (v. 5). Jesus is angry, but it is because of the people's spiritual stubbornness.

Then, the verse says, "But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell," but Scripture teaches that there are instances when we should indeed call someone a fool. For example, in Matthew 23:17, Jesus calls the Pharisees and the scribes "blind fools," because they teach and practice traditions that undermine God's law. In Luke 24:25, Jesus calls his own disciples "foolish," because they are "slow of heart to believe." In 1 Corinthians 15:36, Paul calls the Corinthians "foolish," because of their misconceptions about the resurrection. In Galatians 3:1, Paul calls the Galatians "foolish," because they have been "bewitched" by false doctrine. In James 2:20, James calls a person "foolish," because he distorts the teaching on salvation by faith. And Psalm 14:1 and 53:1 say, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

From these verses, we can readily see that it is appropriate to call someone a fool when we are calling attention to his unbiblical beliefs and actions, rather than because of personal offenses. If you are a non-Christian, you are indeed stupid; if you are a heretic, you are indeed a moron. If your behavior violates biblical ethics, you are indeed an idiot; if your beliefs violates biblical teachings, you are indeed a fool. Therefore, it is entirely

legitimate for Matthew Henry to write, "Atheism is folly, and atheists are the greatest fools in nature."⁵⁰

We must guard against using the above qualification to soften or distort what Jesus teaches here, or else we would be committing the same error that Jesus is correcting. It is true that there is such a thing as righteous anger and appropriate insult, but most of the time we are angry because of personal offenses, and out of this unrighteous anger comes the kind of insult that Jesus warns us about in this passage. James writes, "But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20, NASB).

The punishment for breaking the sixth commandment – that is, all that it includes and implies – is most severe. Anyone who breaks this commandment is "subject to judgment" and "in danger of the fire of hell." Just like the person who has committed actual murder, the person who has merely entertained the things that lead to murder, even if he has not committed the final act of murder, is subject to the ultimate punishment.

"The fire of hell" is literally "the hell of fire" or "the gehenna of fire." Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom, located at the south of Jerusalem. The place was once used for burning children as sacrifices to the false god Molech (or Moloch; 2 Kings 23:10). King Josiah stopped the sacrifices and made the place a dumping ground for rubbish and corpses of criminals.⁵¹ By the first century, the Jews were still disposing of their garbage there. They kept the fire burning to destroy the garbage and the worms infesting it.⁵² Jesus uses Gehenna to symbolize the final place of punishment where God will send the non-Christians. The implication, of course, is that non-Christians are garbage, and that God will send them to a place of endless torment, where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48).

This passage is and should be disturbing to many people, because it seems that Jesus has in effect condemned all of humanity to hell by such a strict (but correct!) exposition and application of the sixth commandment. If this is your impression, then you are right, and only through Christ can you escape the fire of hell.

Several years before my conversion, when I was still a child, I pestered my mother into buying me a Bible. When I came to this passage, fear struck my heart, for by that young age, I had already committed the sins of illegitimate anger and insults – many, many, many times.

As a child, I understood what Jesus meant, and I realized that I stood condemned. But many pastors today can preach right through the Sermon on the Mount and fail to proclaim the strict demands of God's law, the terrifying punishment for breaking it, and the inescapable doom of those who fail to trust Christ for salvation. Maybe their reading

⁵⁰ *The Matthew Henry Study Bible*; World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1997; p. 1.

⁵¹ D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary); Zondervan Publishing House, 1984; p. 149.

⁵² *Life Application*, p. 93.

comprehension and exegetical skills cannot measure up even to a child reading the Scripture for the first time in his second language.

I began my ministry at the age of sixteen by teaching an adult Bible class. One week I had the opportunity to speak to a woman after the session. Since I had never spoken to her before, I tried to assess her spiritual condition by asking several relevant questions. That was when she told me that she had never sinned in all her life – not even once.

This woman was at least forty years old, so I was sure that she had a very distorted concept of sin if she thought that she had never sinned even once during all this time. I cannot recall all that I said to her, but I remember that besides pointing to 1 John 1:8, I also read to her the passage that we are now dealing with: "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment....anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (v. 22). I asked, "Can you say that you have never been angry with someone or insulted someone in your life? Not even once? Not even an angry or hateful thought?"

She could not answer. Even as spiritually dull as she was at the time, she realized that she had violated the sixth commandment many times. Before our conversation, she had defined sin to include only those things that she thought she had never done. But Christ's plain teaching exposed her error and self-deception

Maybe you think that you are not a sinner, or even think that you have never sinned in your whole life. Like this woman, you probably define sin in such a way as to include only those things that you *think* you have never done. But you cannot avert God's judgment simply by redefining sin or distorting the commandments; God will judge you on his terms, not yours.

In verses 21-22, Jesus teaches that the commandment prohibiting murder does not forbid only the overt and physical act of murder, but everything that leads to it as well, including angry thoughts and hateful words. But there is still more to the sixth commandment. In verses 23-26, Jesus teaches that the commandment does not only forbid destructive thoughts and words, but it also demands a person to actively pursue reconciliation.

Theologians are correct when they say that every "negative" command from God does not only forbid the sinful thoughts and actions that it specifies, but it also implies a positive duty to perform the corresponding righteous thoughts and actions. For example, the command prohibiting adultery does not only forbid promiscuity and infidelity, but it also implies a positive duty to maintain one's purity and love one's spouse. Likewise, the command prohibiting idol worship also implies the positive duty to rightly love and worship the true God. Accordingly, a thief stops being a thief not just when he stops stealing, but when he starts giving (Ephesians 4:28).

Again, this is not a novel use of the commandments, but it is thoroughly consistent with the teaching of Moses, who taught long ago: "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life" (Leviticus 19:16), and as a case law, taught, "When you build a new

house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof" (Deuteronomy 22:8). That is, we are to take practical measures to protect other people's safety.

Jesus offers two scenarios to illustrate the necessity (v. 23-24) and the urgency (v. 25-26) of reconciliation.

In the first one, Jesus says, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

If God commands us to perform a certain religious ceremony or ritual, then of course it is right to do it. But it is often easier for us to go through the outward motions of a religious ceremony than to practice the inward virtues that God also commands, such as honesty, humility, purity, and love.

Here a person is about to offer a gift at the altar to God. It is a solemn occasion, and outwardly speaking, it is a commendable thing to do. But Jesus says that if this person remembers that his "brother" has something against him, he should stop what he is doing, and first seek reconciliation with his brother, and then return to offer his gift.

Whereas Jesus at first applies the sixth commandment to our own hateful attitudes and actions against others, now he teaches that we have a duty to seek reconciliation when other people have something against us. In other words, we are not just to master our own thoughts and actions, but we are to actively repair our damaged relationships.

Jesus does not say that we are to seek reconciliation only when we are in the wrong, but that we are to go to the person who has "something against us." Of course, just because a person has something against you does not necessarily mean that you have done something wrong, and Scripture teaches definite procedures by which you are to discuss and resolve the problems in your personal relationships.

If your brother falsely blames you for something, then once you gently explain the truth to him, he should stop being angry at you or even ask you to forgive him. But if he continues to be unreasonably and unbiblically angry at you even after your gentle explanation and persuasion, then you are innocent of all wrong doing; rather, this brother who falsely blames you for something is in the wrong. Of course, if he rightly blames you for something, then you should go to him and ask him for his forgiveness, and when you do this, Scripture commands him to forgive you (Luke 17:4).

In other words, whether the brother's complaint is legitimate or not, you are to go to him and sincerely seek reconciliation; however, you cannot control the outcome. Scripture also commands the brother who has something against you to come to you and seek reconciliation (Matthew 18:15), but you must go to him whether he comes to you or not. Of course, the ideal situation is when each of you decide to seek reconciliation, and meet the other person on the way.

In the second scenario, instead of speaking about "your brother," Jesus refers to "your adversary." Here you have someone taking you to court because of a certain dispute. Again, his complain may or may not be legitimate, but it is wise to settle matters out of court, since you may lose your case and get into even greater trouble. Sometimes people become so contentious that they prefer to go through all the inconveniences of court trials to vindicate themselves. But if it is possible, it is better to seek reconciliation even with your adversary.

The Pharisees and the scribes use the commandment, not according to its true intent, but as a license to think and do all the things that come short of actual murder. But there are other ways to distort the sixth commandment.

For example, many people use this commandment to claim that God forbids capital punishment. But like the Pharisees, these people mishandle God's law because of a similar basic error, namely, instead of using the whole of Scripture to define the terms used in God's commandments, they use their own extra-biblical definitions.

It is true that the sixth commandment itself does not explicitly exclude capital punishment as murder. However, this cannot be an argument for the understanding that the commandment forbids capital punishment, for the reason that it does not mention other things also. For example, the sixth commandment itself does not say that it is limited to human life, and so some people have applied it even to animal life, saying that it is murder to kill an animal for food. However, if this is a correct use of the commandment, we must also say that the commandment applies to insects, plants, and even germs. But these same people do not hesitate to eat salads, and they are killing germs just by being alive.

For those who oppose capital punishment, murder means any killing of human life, but they ignore all the other biblical passages that command the use of capital punishment on certain criminals. But if they ignore other parts of the Scripture, then they have no right to appeal to any part of Scripture, since their assertions are in reality solely based on their own opinion and preference. In any case, capital punishment is not murder, because God says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6). And Paul writes that the government official "does not bear the sword for nothing," but that he is "an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4).

There are still other misinterpretations. Some people have misinterpreted the sixth commandment to mean that one may not kill another person even in self-defense. For example, they say that it would be murder to kill an intruder who breaks into your home. However, God's law says, "If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed" (Exodus 22:2) – the defender is not guilty of breaking the sixth commandment. If to kill someone in self-defense is not murder, then this means that not every killing of a human life is murder.

Just as we should not allow human traditions to relax God's commandments, neither should we distort the commandments to forbid things that Scripture does not define as sinful. Murder cannot mean just anything that you want it to mean. Although we may legitimately consider the Ten Commandments as the foundation of biblical ethics, we may not therefore ignore other parts of Scripture that define and explain these very commandments, or forget that the Bible is one whole and united revelation from God. Therefore, to know what murder means, we must consider what the whole of Scripture says on the subject. This also implies that an understanding of systematic theology is the necessary prerequisite for an understanding of biblical ethics.

ADULTERY (Matthew 5:27-30)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Jesus moves on to talk about the seventh commandment, which prohibits adultery. What we have seen about the ways in which God's commands have been distorted and redefined also apply here. Jesus is not contradicting or expanding the seventh commandment itself, but he is contradicting the false interpretations of this commandment that has been adopted by the people. The Pharisees and the scribes distort God's commandments by redefining the terms and restricting their applications, so as to make them easier to obey. However, this only means that they are breaking the commandments without admitting it. Although they blatantly subvert the commandments and teach others to do the same, they insist on thinking that they are following them quite well.

Our sinful minds tend to distort God's law, making its application so narrow that we are less likely to come under its condemnation. Thus we distort the sixth commandment and claim that it forbids only the final act of murder, and then we proclaim ourselves free from all vengeful sins. Likewise, we distort the seventh commandment and claim that it forbids only the final act of adultery, and then we proclaim ourselves free from all lustful sins. This seems to be a convenient and pain-free way of attaining "righteousness"; however, this righteousness is an illusion that comes from distorting and redefining God's law, but not a genuine righteousness that comes from a pure and transformed heart that pursues actual obedience. God does not accept justification by redefinition, and those who try to cheat his actual demands would only end up in the fire of hell.

The seventh commandment says, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). But does this mean that anything short of adulterous sexual intercourse is acceptable? The Jews have no excuse for restricting this commandment to only the overt, physical, and final act of adultery, since the tenth commandment itself makes it clear that God's law rules over both the body and the mind, saying, "You shall not *covet* your neighbor's wife"

(v. 17). That is, not only must you not *take*, but you must not even *covet*. Even without examining biblical passages outside of the Ten Commandments, we already see that God claims authority over all aspects of our lives, and that he leaves nothing to ourselves. He does not claim the right to rule over only our physical actions, but also over our very thoughts, desires, and motives.

As with other commandments, people are very creative when it comes to finding ways to distort and break the seventh commandment. Statements such as "Follow your heart" and "Do what makes you happy" are often justification enough for them to commit adultery, or enough for them to think that what they do is not adulterous or sinful at all. Some people, including professing Christians, pay lip service to the seventh commandment, but at the same time insist that if two people come short of having actual sexual intercourse, then whatever they do, they have not committed adultery.

More than several people have asked if the seventh commandment, which forbids adultery, permits fornication. They knew to call something fornication, but they still wondered if they could do it. One is amazed that these people even bother, since with such an approach to the commandments, they can hardly escape the fire of hell.

As Paul writes, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? *Do not be deceived*; neither fornicators...nor adulterers...nor homosexuals...shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NASB). Paul realizes that it is possible to be deceived, so that a person may think that even unrepentant fornicators, adulterers, and homosexuals could be saved. He hastens to point out that all these people will be condemned to hell.

When it comes to knowing what they can get away with, and how far they can go without breaking God's law, they suddenly become very careful and precise, trying to find every possible loophole, and demanding airtight arguments from the preacher for every prohibition. But when it comes to the positive demands of God's law, and the fine points of biblical doctrines, they yawn and moan, and complain that these things should be left to the theologians.

In verses 29 and 30, Jesus suggests what seems to be a surprising and even extreme solution: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Whatever we make of these verses, we should first note that what Jesus says here is literally true – it is indeed far better to be maimed than to be condemned to hell. These verses remind us that we often do not take sin seriously enough, but God takes it very seriously.

Nevertheless, Jesus is not commanding self-mutilation as the solution to sexual sins. Indeed, the thrust of verse 28 is that it is possible to commit adultery in our minds, and

even if we gouge out both of our eyes and cut off both of our hands, the sinful mind remains just as active as ever.

Instead of calling for self-mutilation, Jesus is using a striking imagery to convey what other New Testament writers call the "mortification" of sin, that is, putting our sin to death. For example, Paul writes, "For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13). But mortification, or putting our sin to death, is not limited to the body, since elsewhere Paul writes, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

Therefore, the mortification of sin involves "putting to death" the sin that remains in us by the power of God's Spirit. Christ's language in Matthew 5 suggests that this sometimes involves drastic practical measures by which we attempt to cut off something that "causes you to sin." Depending on your particular situations and vulnerabilities, this may include breaking off certain habits, hobbies, activities, and even relationships.

For example, you may love swimming as a hobby or sport, but if going to the pool or the beach creates occasions upon which you persistently entertain lustful thoughts about the scantily dressed men or women there, then it is probably better for you to stop going, and if necessary, to quit swimming altogether.

You may say, "Now that's legalism!" No, it might be legalistic if I say that the seventh commandment in and of itself forbids you to go to the pool or the beach, or that it forbids you to swim regardless of your particular dispositions and vulnerabilities. That is, it would be legalistic to add human traditions to the commandment to supposedly help you obey that commandment, and then elevate these traditions to the level of the commandment itself. But Jesus says, "*If* your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away." He does not say to do it no matter what, but he is telling us to take whatever practical measures necessary to obey God's commands. *If* this means that you must stop going to the beach, or that you must throw away your television, then you should do it.

Jesus says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications...These are the things which defile the man" (Matthew 15:19-20, NASB). Modern thinking suggests, "It is not wrong if you only think it but do not act on it." But Jesus says that it is indeed wrong if you entertain lustful thoughts. Then comes the response, "Oh, then if you think it, you might as well do it." But this is not right either; rather, as God says to Cain when it comes to hateful thinking, "You must master it" (Genesis 4:7). When sinful thoughts begin to surface in your mind, do not entertain them, and do not sit back and watch them grow; instead, you must immediately and decisively destroy them. If this requires taking certain drastic and even painful or costly practical measures, then do it, for the sake of obedience, and for the sake of your soul.

DIVORCE (Matthew 5:31-32)

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Since Jesus proceeds to discuss divorce, it may appear that he is moving on to the next subject or example in his sermon; however, several indications suggest that verses 31 and 32 are only a continuation and extension of what Jesus started in the previous verses.

First, the beginning of verse 31 in fact contains the Greek connective *de*, which can be translated as "also," "and," or "moreover." It is often unexpressed in English, so that it is absent from the KJV and NIV, but it shows up in the NASB, so that it reads, "And it was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'" Second, whereas the other five sections or examples all begin with "You have heard that it was said" (v. 21, 27, 33, 38, 43), verse 31 begins with the words, "It has been said." Thus it seems that Jesus here cites a new quotation without starting an entirely new topic. Third, although the subject seems to be about divorce, the relevant sin in question is still "adultery" (v. 32), which is the topic of the previous passage (v. 27-30). Fourth, after this passage on divorce, Jesus begins the next example by saying, "again" (v. 33), which probably signals to the audience that he is starting a new topic. Therefore, it seems certain that verse 31 does not begin an entirely new topic, but follows what Jesus has just finished saying about adultery (v. 27-30).

Now, it has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce" (v. 31). This alludes to how the Jews understand Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which reads as follows:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

In Matthew 5:31, Jesus is not directly quoting from the Old Testament, but he is referring to the Jews' understanding of and inference from this passage.

First, we must note that *even if* the passage really says, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce," it does not imply that God approves of divorce, or that he regards it as not serious.

To illustrate, in some places, convicted sex offenders are required to register and update their personal information with the local police – that is, "If you are a sex offender, then you must register." However, this does not imply that the government approves of sex offenders so long as they register with the police. In fact, the intent of this requirement is to protect the potential victims of sex crimes.

Likewise, *even if* God's law says, "If you divorce your wife, then you must write her a certificate of divorce," it does not imply that divorce is a morally good or neutral thing. Rather, the custom is most likely in place for the benefit of the "victim" in a divorce, which would almost certainly be the woman in those days.

In any case, Moses here does not command the man to write a certificate of divorce, but he merely assumes the practice, and mentions it in passing as he makes his point. The main thrust of this passage may not be immediately obvious because of its numerous details and qualifications, but if we remove most of the clauses for the moment, we see that it reads, "If a man...sends [his wife] from his house...and...she becomes the wife of another man...[he] is not allowed to marry her again." This, and not the certificate, is the main thrust of what Moses is saying. To paraphrase, "If you divorce your wife, and if she then marries another man, then you must not marry her again." A man is not permitted to remarry his former wife once she has married a second man, even if the second man then dies or divorces her.

Among other reasons, this regulation is perhaps meant to prevent hasty divorce, or to prevent "legal" wife swapping. That is, if the law permits men to marry, divorce, and remarry whomever and whenever they wish, then the men could practice wife swapping, and technically remain innocent from adultery, since each man would be married to the woman that he is with during the time that he has her. This regulation prevents this and other practices that God regards as "detestable." But rather than acknowledging and obeying the obvious meaning of this command, the Jews have made it into a law about writing out the certificate.

In Matthew 19, the Pharisees came to test Jesus, and ask, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (v. 3). When Jesus, in effect, answers in the negative (v. 4-6), they then ask, "Why then...did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" In other words, the Pharisees indeed interpret Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as granting them permission to divorce "for any and every reason," so long as they write out a certificate of divorce. However, the main thrust of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is to decree a *prohibition* related to remarriage, and not a *permission* related to divorce.

Against their disregard for and distortion of God's law, Jesus pronounces, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:32).

Since what we call the exception clause ("except for marital unfaithfulness") is exactly that – that is, it states an *exception* – it may be profitable to first read the verse without it, so that we may focus on the main point, and then return to it. Without the exception clause, the verse then reads, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

The statement is obviously a very broad disapproval of divorce, and warns about its disastrous consequences. Although the verse is already very clear, it will help us to obtain a fuller picture of Christ's teaching on divorce if we also look at what he says about the subject elsewhere.

First, there are the verses in which Christ gives a positive statement about marriage, which will also help us understand and apply his teaching on divorce:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate....Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."
(Matthew 19:4-6, 8)

Marriage is not a human invention, but it is a creation ordinance initiated by God himself. Since it is God who joins together the man and the woman in a marriage, only God can properly dissolve it, and this he does only by the death of at least one of the two. This is an established teaching, so that Paul uses it as an example when he wishes to make a point about something else:

For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. (Romans 7:2-3)

A marriage is properly dissolved only when at least one of the two dies. Paul does not say that the woman commits adultery if she marries another man without first getting a divorce, but he says that she commits adultery if she marries another man if the original husband is "still alive." Elsewhere Paul writes, "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives" (1 Corinthians 7:39) – not just as long as they do not get a divorce.

Thus it seems that even a divorce does not dissolve a marriage, but only death does. In other words, if you are married now, even if you divorce your spouse before a human

court, you are still not allowed to marry again; if you do, then you commit adultery, and God will hold you accountable for it.

Now we will turn to the parallel passages in which Jesus describes what happens when people divorce their spouses. Again, for now we will remove the exception clause in each verse where it appears:

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." (Matthew 5:32)

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife...and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:11-12)

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Luke 16:18)

Thus, when a divorce occurs, the following people will end up committing adultery:

1. The man who divorces, and then remarries.
2. The woman who divorces, and then remarries.
3. The man who marries the divorced woman.
4. The woman who marries the divorced man.⁵³

We can summarize Christ's teaching this way: "It is God who joins together a man and a woman in marriage, so that only God can and may dissolve it by the death of at least one of the two; therefore, *do not divorce at all.*"

We can see that this understanding of Christ's teaching is correct by noting how Paul restates it to the Corinthians: "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Although he is giving this command to the Corinthians, he says, "not I, but the Lord," because he is merely restating what Jesus says as recorded in the Gospels.

What Paul says here is identical to what Jesus teaches, and may be summarized as follows:

⁵³ The fourth proposition is the only one not directly stated in these verses, but if the man who divorces and then remarries commits adultery, then it is necessarily true that the woman who marries such a man is an adulteress. This fourth proposition is true for the same reason that the third proposition is true.

1. A wife must not divorce her husband.
2. A husband must not divorce his wife.
3. If they do separate,⁵⁴ then they must remain unmarried.
4. Otherwise, they must be reconciled to one another.

Christ's teaching on divorce is such that the disciples say to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). Without expounding on Christ's answer (v. 11-12), we will just take this strong reaction from the disciples as an additional confirmation to our understanding, that Christ indeed intends to assert a very strict view on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Indeed, biblical teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage is so strict that, without shying away from marriage altogether, we must not rush into marriage, thinking that we may always get a divorce and remarry if it does not work out. Rather, since God says that he hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), we must adopt the same attitude.

Now we will return to the exception clause. Since the exception clause is an *exception* clause, it is not even mentioned in the parallel verses in Mark and Luke, nor does Paul mention the exception clause when he restates Christ's teaching on divorce. An exception is an *exception*, so that it is not something that should usually happen. This is important, because many wicked men and women would love to seize on any provision for an exception to distort and universalize it, and to broaden what is supposed to be a very narrow allowance.

Only Matthew includes the exception clause; the two verses in which it appears are as follows:

"But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."
(Matthew 5:32)

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."
(Matthew 19:9)

Christ teaches that a person is not permitted to divorce for any reason, but here he offers one exception, and only one very narrow and specific exception – namely, when there is "marital unfaithfulness." Even so, one is not commanded to divorce the unfaithful spouse, but merely permitted to do so.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Paul is probably referring to a separation that occurs when one of the two has committed fornication; otherwise, he is assuming that one might disobey Christ's teaching and separate anyway.

⁵⁵ Some have argued with some skill that what is translated "marital unfaithfulness" refers only to gross and extreme perversion (such as incest), and that alone is legitimate grounds for divorce. See J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth*; Bethany House, 1981.

Then, although many biblical scholars argue that a divorce caused by marital unfaithfulness properly ends the marriage, so that at least the innocent party is free to remarry, others have rather convincingly argued otherwise, so that even the innocent one is to remain unmarried, or else be reconciled with his or her spouse (1 Corinthians 7:11).⁵⁶

The Pharisees approach God's commandments with the intent to find out just how far they can go and how much they can get away with without committing sin. But with this attitude, they invariably twist and distort God's law to make more room for their sin. If a person is obsessed with finding out how he can get out of a marriage, then he is already guilty of subverting God's commandments. Rather, based on a sound understanding that marriage is meant to endure for life, he should actively discover biblical ways to solidify, improve, and if necessary, repair his marriage.

But just as Jesus is not limiting his ethical teaching to only those examples that he cites in the Sermon on the Mount, rebellious and corrupt individuals do not limit themselves only to distorting God's commandments on marriage. For example, many contemporary theologians spend their time trying to argue for the bare minimum of what it takes to become a Christian, or receive salvation. They ask, "What is the bare minimum of what one must believe to receive salvation? What is the least the one must do? How sinful and corrupt can a person's lifestyle be, and still be called a Christian?" Some of them even teach that you may receive Christ as Savior but not as Lord, and still be saved. But this is not the kind of ministry that honors Christ, who says, "Go and make disciples...teaching them to *obey everything* I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Nowadays, professing Christians divorce one another for almost any reason, and their churches do very little to stop them. In some congregations, the members have divorced and remarried so often that, in effect, they have been swapping spouses with one another and with the world. "Christians" commit adultery with one another, divorce their spouses, and then marry one another. Then, after a while, they cheat again, divorce again, and remarry again. This is an abomination.

Against this horrifying trend, those of us who truly follow Christ must practice and teach what he commands; that is, marriage is for life, so that there is to be no divorce at all.

OATHS (Matthew 5:33-37)

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

⁵⁶ See David J. Engelsma, *Better to Marry*; Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1993.

The statement that Jesus cites in verse 33 does not appear to be an exact quotation from the Old Testament, but a summary of what it teaches in the following verses: "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:12); "When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said" (Numbers 30:2); "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin" (Deuteronomy 23:21).

Although the statement in verse 33 is not a complete summary of all that the Old Testament teaches on the subject, it appears to be accurate as far as it goes. However, by now we know that the Pharisees and the scribes would not literally follow and teach God's law, but that they would invariably impose their own definitions and traditions upon it.

The commandments demand the people to fulfill their vows.⁵⁷ If you say that something is true, then it better be true, and if you say that you will do something, then you must do it. But the Pharisees and the scribes think that if the law says, "Do not swear falsely *by my name*," then it means that they may swear falsely as long as they do not swear by God's name!

Thus they designed an elaborate system indicating whether an oath is or is not binding, depending on the formula used – specifically, on how closely the vow is associated with God or his name. In other words, they have invented human traditions and regulations never taught by the law itself, but rather imposed upon it, to get around having to tell the truth and keep their vows.

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and the scribes in Matthew 23 about the same thing, and there he says:

"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it." (v. 16-22)

⁵⁷ Although some commentators distinguish between oaths and vows, I will use them interchangeably in what follows, since even if they are different, our discussion will equally apply to both.

Jesus is referring to how the Pharisees and the scribes make fine distinctions between how one makes an oath, so that if an oath is made a certain way, they would even say that "it means nothing." But if an oath is an oath, one wonders how it could ever mean nothing.

At any rate, Jesus points out that, for all their fine distinctions, their theological reasoning is poor and makes no sense in the first place; that is, even the traditions by which they subvert God's law are not that clever. Like today's liberal theologians, it is not that the Pharisees are too intellectual for their own good, but that their minds are too feeble to give even a half-decent excuse for their disobedience.

Contrary to what many people think, Scripture never opposes "hairsplitting" precision when it comes to understanding God's law *in order to obey it*. They think that Jesus faults the Pharisees for being so meticulous about obeying the law that they neglect to show any mercy, but the very opposite is true – he accuses the Pharisees for being too meticulous about *disobeying* the law. It is God's law that commands us to show mercy in the first place. As Micah says, "And what does the LORD require of you? To *act justly* and to *love mercy* and to *walk humbly* with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Justice, mercy, and humility are all Old Testament teachings; those who think that these are characteristics newly emphasized by the New Testament reveal that they understand neither the Old nor the New. It is wrong to think, as some people do, that the Old Testament teaches a morality of the law, while the New Testament teaches a morality of the heart. The truth is that God has always taught a morality of the heart *by the law*; the problem is that those who follow human traditions refuse to obey him.

Some of those who try to turn away from what they falsely perceive as legalism claim to emphasize mercy rather than law, but certainly they do not know what mercy is when they think that to show mercy is to relax the law's requirements. Jesus says, "Anyone who breaks [literally, "relaxes" or "loosens"] one of *the least* of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

Returning to our passage, Jesus refers to several similar ways by which the Pharisees and the scribes attempt to justify false oaths, and he says that these are also based on inferior theological reasoning. Thus they say that since the law teaches that an oath made before God or in his name is binding, then if one wishes to make an oath that is not binding, he simply has to avoid making direct or close reference to God, such as if one swears by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem, or by one's head (v. 34-36).

Jesus responds with what the Pharisees and the scribes should already know very well, that heaven is said to be God's throne, that the earth is said to be his footstool (Isaiah 66:1), and that Jerusalem is said to be the city of the Great King (Psalm 48:2). As for our head, even our own hairs are under God's control instead of ours (Matthew 10:29-30). The point is that God knows and governs every part of his creation, so that it is impossible to make an oath without making it before God. Therefore, in the place of false

swearing and hypocritical oaths, Jesus commands, "Do not swear at all...Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'" (v. 34, 37).

Again, all this is not Jesus' novel ethical teaching; rather, he is just drawing out what the Old Testament plainly teaches, that is, what the Pharisees and the scribes should already know, but obviously refuse to follow:

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the [temple] messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God. (Ecclesiastes 5:4-7)

"These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD. (Zechariah 8:16-17)

Once you have made a vow, it is futile to claim that a vow is not binding, or that you have made a mistake; therefore, it is better not to make a vow at all than to make one and then break it. However, this does not mean that you may lie as long as you do not swear to the tell the truth! To think this way would just be another way of distorting biblical teaching.

We must note the main thrust of the passage, so that we do not misapply what Jesus is saying. He is primarily denouncing those who permit themselves to make empty oaths by redefining and distorting God's law. His concern is for people to tell the truth and mean what they say (v. 37), so that your "Yes" should mean "Yes," and your "No" should mean "No." And if this is your practice, then there should be no need for you to swear at all; other people should be able to trust what you say even if you do not explicitly swear to God or appeal to him as your witness. Thus his emphasis is more like, "Do not swear," rather than, "You must refuse to swear" or "I forbid you to swear."

Now, Jesus has already said that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17), and he opposes those who relax even the least of the commandments (v. 19). With this in mind, it is impossible to understand our passage as an absolute prohibition against swearing for every occasion and for every reason, such as when required by a secular or church court.

This is because Jesus has already said that he would not contradict the least of God's commandments, and the law teaches as follows:

You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him, and *swear by His name*. (Deuteronomy 6:13, NASB)

But the king will rejoice in God; *all who swear by God's name will praise him*, while the mouths of liars will be silenced. (Psalm 63:11)

Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; *by me every tongue will swear*. (Isaiah 45:22-23)

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will *swear by the God of truth*. For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes. (Isaiah 65:16)

"If you will return, O Israel, return to me," declares the LORD. "If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray, and if in a truthful, just and righteous way *you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives,'* then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory." (Jeremiah 4:1-2)

Swearing *itself* is not the problem. In fact, when you legitimately and reverently swear by the name of God, you are explicitly acknowledging that God is your Sovereign Lord, to whom you offer worship and to whom you are accountable, and that you are ever conscious of his presence and power. Proper swearing on proper occasions actually honors God.

Rather, the problem is with casual and false swearing. Jeremiah refers to those who, "Although they say, 'As surely as the LORD lives,' still they are swearing falsely" (Jeremiah 5:2). In other words, they acknowledge God by their words, but the things that they say are false, which means that they falsely claim to fear him, and that they profane his name by associating it with lies. Scripture is against this in both the Old and New Testaments, and it is especially this kind of false swearing that Jesus opposes.

Besides Matthew 5:17-19, Jesus also confirms this understanding of his teaching on oaths by his own example. At his trial under the high priest, Jesus remains silent as he is questioned and as false witnesses testify against him (Matthew 26:59-63). Thus he fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, who wrote: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7; see Acts 8:32-35). But then, the high priest charges Jesus to speak by invoking God's name: "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (v. 63). At that, Jesus answers, "Yes, it is as you say" (v. 64).

Paul also demonstrates the proper manner and occasion for a formal appeal to God. In his letter to the Galatians, he writes, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12). Then, he solemnly affirms that he is telling the truth by appealing to God: "I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie" (v. 20). In this letter, Paul is attempting to correct serious doctrinal errors that have infiltrated the church, and he finds it appropriate to begin by establishing the origin of the gospel, and his authority as its apostle.

Then, in one of his letters to the Corinthians, he again finds it necessary to defend his calling as an apostle, especially in light of the infiltration of false apostles into the church. Thus he cites some of his qualifications and experiences as an apostle, and again solemnly affirms what he says by appealing to God: "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying" (2 Corinthians 11:31).

In both of these cases, Paul is facing serious problems in the churches, and his appeals to God are solemn and sincere. He is not trying to deceive his readers into believing him when he is not telling the truth; rather, he is already telling the truth, but since the claims and the oppositions are serious, he also assures his readers that he is conscious that his words and conducts are performed before God, and that God will hold him accountable for them.

Neither is Paul appealing to God for personal benefit and convenience, or to facilitate some trivial transaction; rather, he solemnly affirms that he is telling the truth for the sake of the gospel. That said, it seems that ordination to the ministry is another occasion in which it is proper to appeal to God as witness (2 Timothy 4:1).

Another example is the marriage vow. Since marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman (Malachi 2:14), it necessarily involves a vow. Applying Jesus' teaching to the marriage vow, we should understand that he is not against the vow as such, but if you were to claim that the vow is not binding because it was not formulated in a particular way, then this is what Jesus condemns.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, with all these examples in which a formal appeal to God is appropriate, swearing remains unnecessary and even sinful for most occasions and purposes, such as to make our ordinary and trivial statements more credible. A formal appeal to God is made only on special occasions and for special purposes, so that it should rarely happen, if at all; in addition, this by no means imply that we may be any less truthful in our daily conversations, when we make no formal appeal to God. Whether we swear or not, our "Yes" should mean "Yes," and our "No" should mean "No."

⁵⁸ Scripture indeed allows a vow to be legitimately nullified in certain occasions, such as by a father or a husband at the time *when he hears about it*, but not afterward (Numbers 30:3-15). Since something like the Roman Catholic teaching of "annulment" goes beyond what Scripture permits and specifies, it is an abomination, and commits the very kind of error that Jesus condemns in our passage.

Therefore, the Westminster Confession of Faith is correct when it says the following (22.1-2):

A lawful oath is part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, or promiseth, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth.

The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. Therefore, to swear vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name; or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the new testament as well as under the old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.

People have invented various ways by which they disobey Jesus' teaching; sometimes they try to excuse their lying, and sometimes they try to attack the truth. Some people make assertions about what they will do, but then later dismiss it by saying, "But I never promised." Or, they may say, "I said that with my fingers crossed." Others may adopt some form of relativism or situational ethics to excuse their lies.

Today, many people are pragmatists, mainly because they are selfish and stupid. They believe that the end justifies the means, so that whether they tell the truth depends on whether it will produce the results that they desire. Besides being an irrational philosophical position, pragmatism reverses the teaching of Scripture, which says, "He whose walk is blameless...keeps his oath even when it hurts" (Psalm 15:2, 4). Because pragmatism is an irrational and unbiblical philosophy, Christians must not be pragmatists. So we speak the truth and fulfill our promises even if it makes us unpopular, and even if it invites persecution.

People trivialize the truth by attaching to their statements expressions like, "I swear to God," "Honest to God," or even "I swear on my mother's grave." Even when they are telling the truth, they often abuse the truth. They might present the truth in a partial and deceptive manner, so that it ends up misleading the hearer. Or, they might use it to promote and then defend gossip, claiming that they are just telling the truth. But all "this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

Several years before my conversion, when I was still a child, if someone was not sure that I was telling the truth, he could make me tell the truth by reminding me that God could hear what I was saying. Since this appears to show that I had some fear of God, it may seem commendable to some people. However, what it really shows is that I was a liar at heart and in practice, and the truth often had to be extracted from me by appealing to God. If I had really feared God, I would have told the truth all the time, and I would not need people to remind me about him.

Then, as I was growing up, I became a complete pragmatist when it came to telling the truth. Often, I did not even think in terms of the true and the false, but I would just say anything that I thought was to my advantage. Truth itself was worthless to me, so that whenever I refrained from lying, it was only because it was not in my best interest, or because I was afraid of getting caught.

It is bad enough when a person must swear to be believed; it is even worse when a person swears to deceive, or swears using a method or a formula that he thinks renders the oath non-binding. This person is a liar whether or not he swears, but Jesus teaches that we should tell the truth and fulfill our promises whether or not we swear. Scripture says that for "all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (Revelation 21:8). James writes, "Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned" (James 5:12). God takes the truth much more seriously than most people think that he does.

After my conversion, I immediately stopped lying altogether. From that time on, I wanted to tell the truth, even at times when telling the truth could generate problems for me. If I told someone that something was true, then it was true. If I told someone that I would do something, then it would be done. If I told someone that I would meet him somewhere at a certain time, then this means that I would usually be there thirty minutes early.

If the situation changed so that I could not perform what I had promised, then I would tell the person as soon as I could. Whenever I thought that I had even unintentionally misstated something or misled someone, conviction would strike my conscience, and I would actively find the person to correct the false statement or impression. I became ever conscious of living and speaking before God, not just when someone appeals to him or mentions him.

It became unnecessary for me to swear, or for others to extract the truth from me, because God sovereignly chose and saved me, and performed what he had promised long ago: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33), and "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27).

Jesus' teaching in this passage is just as true and applicable today, and church leaders should teach it much more often and with greater conviction. Even atheists glibly say, "I swear to God." This is a misuse of God's name, and if God does not sovereignly save them, then they will go to hell for it. But even professing Christians often misuse God's name – they use it in jokes, to curse, and to lie. Of course, many of these are false converts, since real Christians would be terrified to abuse God's name like this. Ministers should warn, rebuke, and if necessary, excommunicate those who commit this very serious sin.

RETALIATION (Matthew 5:38-42)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

The passage on retaliation can be difficult for at least two reasons. First, one may find it hard make sense of the passage just because he does not want to accept what it means or what it appears to mean. However, our own preferences and reservations should have no direct relevance on how to understand a passage. Second, this passage is difficult because it can be easily misinterpreted if one fails to take its context into account. Although one should always note the context when reading anything, the correct understanding of this passage depends on knowledge and application of the context even more than many other passages.

Let us use the commandment against murder as an example. Many people isolate the statement, "You should not murder" (Exodus 20:13), from the rest of the Bible, and then claim that this commandment forbids war and capital punishment. However, other passages from the Old Testament clearly teaches that war is right in some cases, and that capital punishment is right in some cases. These passages certainly do not contradict the commandment against murder; rather, they tell us what murder is not. That is, the killings that occur in biblically justified wars and executions are not murders at all. But when people isolate this verse from the rest of the Bible, then their definition of murder becomes purely private, so that their understanding of this commandment has little relevance to what it actually says.

In a similar way, it is important to consider both the broad and the narrow contexts in which our passage appears. We know that Jesus sets forth an antithesis in each of the several sections that we have been examining. The antithesis in each section is not between Moses and Jesus, but between the false interpretation of the law imposed by human tradition, taught by the Pharisees and the scribes, and the true meaning of the law as expressed by divine revelation, now reaffirmed by Jesus Christ.

This means that what Jesus says in each section is directed against a specific misinterpretation or abuse of the law. If we isolate Jesus' answer to the misinterpretation from the misinterpretation itself, then we will probably fail to grasp what Jesus is really saying. Therefore, when reading our passage, we must not isolate verses 39-42 from verse 38, from the rest of the Sermon (v. 17-20), or from the rest of the Bible.

Jesus begins the antithesis by saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'" (v. 38). By now, we should immediately realize that Jesus is speaking against a false interpretation of the law, and not the law itself.

The statement cited alludes to several passages in the Old Testament, and since even these passages must be read in context, we will at least read the entire paragraphs in which the relevant verses appear:

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take *life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise*. (Exodus 21:22-25)

If anyone takes the life of a human being, he must be put to death. Anyone who takes the life of someone's animal must make restitution – life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him: *fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth*. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured. Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a man must be put to death. You are to have the same law for the alien and the native-born. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 24:17-22)

If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: *life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*. (Deuteronomy 19:16-21)

What is called the law of retribution as taught in these passages has a double effect on the nation's judicial system, namely, it prevents the court from issuing punishments that are either too severe or too lenient. The law of retribution serves as a guiding principle for judges, teaching them that the punishment must be appropriate for and proportional to the crime.

This law also prevents one party from exacting disproportional recompense on another party, and thus in turn prevents perpetual personal vendettas and family feuds. For example, if a member of your family injures the arm of a member of my family, and as revenge my family kills this offender from your family, then the problem has just been escalated, and a bloodbath almost inevitably ensues.

On the other hand, if the power to punish belongs to the court instead of the individual, and if the court faithfully issues punishments that are proportional to the crime, then this

not only ensures that justice is done, but it also prevents further escalation of the dispute. Therefore, the law of retribution is both a prescription and a restriction – prescribing righteous punishments, and restricting excessive compensations.

As a side note, more than a few commentators suggest that even the law of retribution itself does not require the courts to punish, but merely allow them to punish. However, it is clear from the relevant passages that the law in fact requires the courts to punish the offenders. For example, Exodus 21 says, "The offender *must be fined*...But if there is serious injury, *you are to take life for life*...." Leviticus 24 teaches, "Whoever kills an animal *must make restitution*, but whoever kills a man *must be put to death*." And Deuteronomy 19 says, "The judges *must make a thorough investigation*...*You must purge the evil* from among you....*Show no pity*...." Therefore, it is clear that the law of retribution requires the courts to uphold justice, and to issue punishments proportional to the crime; it is not allowed to be either too severe or too lenient.

Then, Jesus says, "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person" (Matthew 5:39). Throughout the Sermon and the previous antithetical sections, he has been directing his remarks to individuals, and our present passage is no exception. Whereas the law of retribution governs the courts, Jesus is speaking to the individuals against a misinterpretation and misapplication of the law of retribution.

It appears that the Jews have illegitimately adopted the law of retribution as justification for personal vengeance. Thus a person who is wronged in some way would require the offender to compensate him to the fullest extent of the law. It is against *this* that Jesus speaks; he is not at all addressing the courts, the police, or the military.

That said, we can now point out two common misinterpretations. This passage is often used to support non-violent resistance or peaceful protests, but this is a clear misuse of what Jesus says here. First, as mentioned, Jesus is directing his remarks toward individuals, and not to groups or political movements. Second, the passage does not teach non-violent resistance, but it teaches *non-resistance* – that is, no resistance at all! Thus it is self-defeating to apply the passage to such protests and movements.

Other people use this passage to support pacifism, that people should not go to war for any reason. However, again, Jesus is addressing individuals here, and not the government or the military. But when Scripture refers to government officials, it says, "He does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4). With this in mind, a careful study of verses 39-42 will reveal the personal application of what Jesus teaches.

We will now examine the several examples that Jesus gives. Starting from verse 39, striking someone on the right cheek is likely to be primarily an act of insult rather than assault. Assuming that the one who strikes is right-handed, as most people are, then to strike the victim on the right cheek would mean hitting him with the back of one's hand – a tremendous insult even today, but especially at that time.

Proceeding to the next verse, the law forbids that one's cloak be permanently taken from him: "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate" (Exodus 22:26-27). But Jesus says, "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Matthew 5:40). Note that Jesus does not contradict the law at all. Exodus 22 addresses the legal obligation of the one who takes someone's cloak, but Jesus refers to the attitude of the one whose tunic and cloak are being taken.

Verse 41 alludes to the ancient practice in which the officials of a nation has the right to demand, within certain limitations, the service of the members of the conquered nation. Specific to the New Testament context, a Roman soldier had the right to commandeer a Jewish citizen for his service and assistance, such as to carry the soldier's load for one mile (or one thousand paces). For example, the Roman soldiers forced Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Christ (Matthew 27:32).

Finally, verse 42 says, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Jesus is merely reaffirming what the law teaches all along. As Deuteronomy 15 says, "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (v. 7-8).

This is where I must again caution against taking this passage out of context and isolating it from the rest of the Bible. For example, Deuteronomy 15:7-8 clearly teaches generosity, but we will misapply the passage if we isolate it from verses like the following:

He who puts up security for another will surely suffer, but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe. (Proverbs 11:15)

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)

In other words, although Scripture commands us to be generous, at the same time it teaches *against* unwise lending and unwise giving. Of course there is no contradiction – taken together, the passages tell us what biblical generosity really means. At least, it means giving and lending to those who are truly in need, but actually *withholding* from those who would abuse our generosity – thus, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

Jesus is merely reaffirming the law – there is no excuse in saying that he contradicts or goes beyond the law in teaching generosity, since 2 Thessalonians is written by Paul *after* both Moses and Jesus, *after* both Deuteronomy 15 and Matthew 5, showing that neither

Moses nor Jesus ever intended to command an absolute and non-discriminating attitude or practice of giving and lending.

Likewise, isolating the other verses will prevent us from truly understanding them; rather, we must derive a coherent position from the whole of Scripture. For example, when Jesus is struck on the face at his trial, he responds, "If I said something wrong...testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" (John 18:23). And when the high priest orders Paul to be struck on the mouth, the apostle answers, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!" (Acts 23:3). As mentioned earlier in another context, the law never forbids legitimate self-defense, even to the point of killing the criminal: "If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed" (Exodus 22:2). Then, on several occasions, Paul asserts his rights as a Roman citizen when he was unjustly persecuted by the authorities (Acts 16:36-39, 22:23-29, 25:11).

Therefore, just as Jesus is correcting an abuse of Scripture in our passage, to take his remarks out of context or to isolate them from the rest of the Bible, as many people have done, is just another way to abuse Scripture. It results in theological positions that Scripture does not really intend to convey, and thus defeats the very purpose for which Jesus utters his comments.

We can go into much greater detail to produce a more specific understanding, but for now, we have enough to arrive at a basic summary and conclusion on the passage. That is, Jesus is teaching his followers to maintain a relatively loose hold on their personal dignity (v. 39), their personal rights (v. 40), their personal liberty (v. 41), and their personal property (v. 42). Jesus does not here repeal the law of retribution, but he is teaching against their use of the law to justify the vengeful attitude that they have adopted, and he is teaching his followers to adopt the opposite attitude, that is, one of sacrifice and generosity, which has also been the law's teaching all along: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18); "Do not say, 'I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did'" (Proverbs 24:29).

Sometimes people unwittingly invent doctrines and traditions that go beyond Scripture, but in the opposite direction of the Jewish misinterpretation. For example, it may surprise them to know that Scripture never opposes revenge *as such*, but it only forbids personal vengeance. In fact, Scripture explicitly teaches that revenge is right, that justice demands it, only that we are not the ones who should carry it out; rather, we should leave it up to God to avenge us: "For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you" (2 Thessalonians 1:6, NASB). Thus the biblical teaching is summarized as follows:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but

leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

LOVE (Matthew 5:43-47)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

The commandment to love is not a revolutionary idea, in that it has been the law's teaching all along, although it is one that many distort and disobey. Jesus has come to reaffirm this all-important commandment, and to call his people to truly obey it.

Specifically, Jesus is alluding to the Jewish interpretation and application of Leviticus 19:18, where it says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." The verse indeed refers to "one of your people," but it does not make the command to "hate your enemy," although the latter may have been, legitimately or not, inferred from a number of Old Testament passages.

In the spirit of the subversive exegesis of the Pharisees and the scribes, the question is posed as to the identity of the "neighbor." This is done, of course, not with the intention to fully obey the commandment, but to restrict its application.

On one occasion, "an expert in the law" (Luke 10:25) who is concerned to "justify himself" (v. 29) tests Jesus with the question. Jesus responds with what we now call the Parable of the Good Samaritan, showing that a neighbor is not only one who is within our small and exclusive group, but a neighbor could be anyone whom we encounter in life and who needs our assistance and compassion, including someone whom we would usually consider our enemy (v. 33). In fact, it seems that Jesus turns the question around, and says in effect, "Instead of focusing so much attention on defining your 'neighbor' with the evil intention to limit the scope of your love, why don't you *be a neighbor* to someone who is in need?" (v. 36).

Against the prevailing misuse of this law, Jesus declares, "But I tell you: Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). Nowadays, both Christians and non-Christians have such a warped and unbiblical concept of love that, for this commandment to be intelligible, we must specify the biblical meaning of love.

Many theologians and commentators agree that the love commanded by Scripture is a volitional but non-emotional benevolence that results in edifying speech and helpful actions toward other people. However, more than a few people wish to include an emotional element to the biblical concept of love.

For example, when referring to the above definition, D. A. Carson writes, "If this were so, 1 Corinthians 13:3 could not disavow 'love' that gives everything to the poor and suffers even to martyrdom; for these are 'concrete actions.'"⁵⁹ But this is an invalid argument, and involves a surprisingly amateurish inference from this professional New Testament scholar. Paul is making the point that one can exhibit "loving" actions without actually having love, and from this, Carson infers that the missing element must be, or at least include, the emotion. Why?! He gives no actual justification for this assertion.

Then, he mentions 2 Samuel 13:1, 2 Timothy 4:10, and Matthew 5:46, presumably to point out that, as the Bible uses the word, love includes the emotion. However, as he explicitly acknowledges, the first example refers to incest, the second to worldliness, and the third to the very kind of restrictive love that Jesus is speaking against.

Since most of the words in *any language* carry more than one possible meaning, and the actual meaning of the word as used must be discerned from observing the context, that the word "love" sometimes includes an emotional element when used in the Bible is itself irrelevant. What we need to find out is whether the love *that the Bible commands us to have* contains such an emotional element. Carson fails to demonstrate that it does, and instead, he commits some of the same errors that he denounces in his *Exegetical Fallacies*,⁶⁰ where he correctly points out that a word can mean different things, depending on the context, so that the origins, the dictionary definitions, and the usage of the word in dissimilar contexts cannot be determinative. However, these are the strategies that he uses in trying to show that biblical love includes the emotion.

When Carson cites his agreement that real love must include actions, he includes several biblical references, such as Luke 6:32-33 and Matthew 5:44. But when he asserts that love must include the emotion, he cites no biblical reference. The real biblical definition of love, that is, the love that the Bible commands us to have, is defined by obedience to the law in all of our relationships (Romans 13:9-10) – and this includes the commands that it makes to both the mind and the body.

Thus although the law may *prohibit* certain negative emotions, such as commanding us to master our anger (Matthew 5:22), the love that it commands is primarily not a positive emotion or a romantic feeling; it is mainly a benevolent volition resulting in practical action. Therefore, biblical love can be sincere and benevolent without necessarily being emotional.

In the very passage that we are now considering, Jesus seems to affirm this understanding of love when he cites the Father's example to illustrate his point, saying, "He causes his

⁵⁹ Carson, *Matthew*; p. 158.

⁶⁰ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*; Baker Book House, 1996.

sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). That is, the Father does not necessarily have to feel a certain emotion toward the unrighteous, but the specific kind of "love" that Jesus is speaking of is demonstrated by the Father's practical benevolence toward both the evil and the good, such as in providing them with sun and rain.

Here is another example in which context determines the meaning of the word. Jesus is not even speaking of a love that saves, but here he is referring to a love that does not necessarily include any spiritual benefit at all; rather, it is a love that results in purely practical benefits. Therefore, he is referring to a general benevolence that God shows toward all his creatures – both the evil and the good – and not the special love that results in salvation, which he shows only toward his chosen ones, or the elect. When it comes to this second kind of love – a saving kind of love – God says, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13).⁶¹

It is this practical kind of love that we are to show toward all human beings, so that in a parallel passage, Jesus says, "Love your enemies, *do good* to those who hate you, *bless* those who curse you, *pray* for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). This kind of love is offered to both the evil and the good, but just by saying this, we are also saying that this love does not blur the theological distinctions between Christians and non-Christians, the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous (v. 45). This love does not at all demand that we think of non-Christians as better than they really are, for indeed they are unrighteous and evil, only that we are to offer them the same kind of practical benevolence that we offer to the righteous and the good. Nevertheless, it seems that we are still to deliberately prefer Christians, especially when we must choose between the two: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us *do good to all* people, *especially* to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).

Again, what Jesus teaches here is not entirely new. It is wrong to think that the Old Testament demands us to love only our inner circle, and that Jesus is now expanding this commandment to include those on the outside. Rather, Jesus is reaffirming what the law has been teaching all along. The Old Testament never limits practical love only to one's inner circle, but in the same chapter where it says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), it also says, "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. *Love him as yourself*, for you were aliens in Egypt" (v. 33-34).

In addition, the Old Testament explicitly commands love, or practical benevolence, even toward one's enemy: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it" (Exodus 23:4-5); "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (Proverbs 25:21).

⁶¹ For more on what Scripture teaches about love and hate, see my *Systematic Theology*.

Paul echoes this teaching in Romans 12:20, and writes, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." But when it comes to spiritual things, Paul does not compromise with the unbeliever in the name of "love," but he even curses him, saying, "If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him" (1 Corinthians 16:22). Having a clear understanding of what it means to love our enemies will promote accurate obedience, and it will also prevent unbelievers from manipulating us by making illegitimate appeals to this biblical command, as they often do.

PERFECTION (Matthew 5:48)

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In Bible translations that group the verses into paragraphs, Matthew 5:48 is usually attached to the section on love. However, it seems that the verse is in fact intended as a summary and conclusion to the several antitheses that we have just studied, so that it applies to verses 17-47, and not just verses 43-47.⁶²

In other words, verse 48 completes the thought that Jesus started in verse 20, where he says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." After pointing out the misinterpretations of the law by the Pharisees and the scribes, and then providing his own correct interpretations, he now explains what he means by a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes. In short, instead of the false righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes, Jesus demands perfect obedience to the law.

Some people point out that the word translated "perfect" often means "mature"; however, even if this point is relevant, we cannot let it dominate our understanding of verse 48, since it says to be perfect *as God* is perfect. It seems more than a little awkward to think that the verse means, "Be *mature*, just like God is *mature*." Rather, by perfection, Jesus is indeed referring to a blameless and flawless condition. As the law itself says, "You must be blameless before the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13).

Now, Jesus is not necessarily saying that we can achieve perfect obedience in this life – for indeed he assumes that we will sin (6:12) – but corresponding to verse 20, he is referring to a kind of righteousness that is perfect and flawless. Just as God's commandments reflect his perfection, Jesus demands the kind of righteousness that truly obeys these commandments, and not the kind of false righteousness that claims to obey them, when in reality it distorts and subverts it.

This understanding seems to be consistent with the corresponding verses in the law. For example, Leviticus 19:2 says, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." This is said in the context of commanding the people to observe the law, and thus God and Christ have in mind that, as we truly follow God's commandments, we are in essence

⁶² See Carson, *Matthew*, p. 160; France, p. 129.

imitating and reflecting God's holiness and perfection. Anything short of this is unworthy of the kingdom of heaven.

HYPOCRISY (Matthew 6:1-18)

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"This, then, is how you should pray:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one."⁶³*

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

⁶³ Here in verses 9-13, I have adopted a different structure for the Lord's Prayer than the one in the NIV, although the words remain the same.

Jesus has been contrasting the true righteousness that he demands from his followers with the false righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes (5:20). He has offered several examples of how they misinterpret and misapply the law in order to lower its demands, enabling them to put up an appearance of obedience and righteousness (5:21-48). Now Jesus turns to address another aspect of their false righteousness, and continues to contrast that with what he demands from his followers (6:1-18).

From the beginning of the Sermon, Jesus has been calling his followers to live a counter-cultural life – to affirm beliefs and exhibit actions that are different from and even contradictory to both unbelievers and false believers. Thus they are not only to be salt and light to the Pharisees and the scribes, but to "the earth" and "the world" (5:13-14). Unbelievers are obviously not God's people, so that they will certainly be condemned to hell. However, false believers like the Pharisees and the scribes are no better, for neither can they enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20). Therefore, Jesus calls for a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the scribes. Specifically, this entails a true understanding of and obedience to God's law (5:21-48).

Although Jesus now seems to shift the focus, he has not moved to an entirely new direction. He is still calling for his followers to exhibit true righteousness from the heart (6:33), especially in contrast to the hypocrites⁶⁴ (6:2, 5, 16) and the pagans (6:7, 32). That 6:1-34 remains within the "inclusio" of "the Law and the Prophets" (5:17, 7:12) tells us that the overarching thrust of this large section remains the same. Whereas Jesus has been dealing with true and false righteousness from the perspective of the moral law, now he deals with the topic from the perspective of expressly religious and pious actions.

As examples, Jesus uses what were considered the three most central acts of religious piety – giving, praying, and fasting. Since Jesus tells his followers not to be like the "hypocrites" (v. 2, 5, 16), and since the words "hypocrites" and "hypocrisy" are often used in contemporary discussions on religion, it is important for us to understand precisely what it is to be a hypocrite.

The word translated "hypocrite" originally refers to an actor; that is, he assumes the personality of a scripted character, and pretends to be this character on stage. The English dictionary defines "hypocrisy" as "a feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not."⁶⁵ In other words, a hypocrite is a person who presents himself as something or someone that he is not, or who presents himself as believing something that he does not really believe. The hypocrite may claim to possess a certain virtue or to affirm a certain doctrine, and he may even take certain steps to convince you that he indeed possesses this virtue or affirms this doctrine, but in reality, he is just putting on a show – he is just acting.

This definition is consistent with how Jesus uses the term. For example, later in Matthew, he says:

⁶⁴ Such as the Pharisees and the scribes. See Matthew 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29.

⁶⁵ *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.*

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." (23:25-28)

Jesus accuses the Pharisees and the scribes for their hypocrisy, because they make themselves look clean on the outside, when they are really unclean on the inside. He says, "On the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." The Pharisees and the scribes are hypocrites because they are mere actors when it comes to their faith and religion.

With this in mind, we shall consider the examples of religious hypocrisy that Jesus gives in Matthew 6.

The first example has to do with giving (v. 2-4). According to Scripture, charitable giving is a religious duty (Deuteronomy 15:7-11); however, it is possible for a person to display the outward motion of charitable giving without having a truly charitable heart.

When the hypocrites give, they find ways to ensure that people pay attention (v. 2). They are hypocrites because they present themselves as spiritual and generous, who sincerely desire God's approval and the people's welfare, but in reality, they are not looking to please God or to help people at all. Rather, their giving is calculated to impress others and to establish a reputation, and this is why they must draw attention to themselves when they give.

In essence, they are merely trying to purchase with their money other people's approval and admiration. Thus Jesus says that this is exactly what they will get. They will get what they pay for and nothing more (v. 2); they will not receive anything from God.

Today, many people exhibit the same hypocrisy when they give. They may give a lot of money to charities, but whenever they make a large donation, they do all sorts of things to draw attention to it. At the least, they will send a press release to publicize the donation. Then, they may want a hall or even an entire building to be named after them. Corporations give mainly for the sake of public relations or as a marketing strategy, so that their names must be displayed in prominent places in the charitable events that they sponsor.

Professing Christians are often no better than the non-Christians. They make donations to their churches to have their names appear on the pews, or to have plaques on the walls to

recognize their contribution. Some people make large donations so that they can assert their place in the church, and to influence church decisions.

Christian churches and ministries often encourage rather than denounce such an abominable attitude. They offer large donors the "VIP treatment," so to speak, such as giving them the best seats in their gatherings, and holding special dinners and conferences for those who have given the most money. Although Scripture denounces these evil practices (James 2:1-9), they are very rampant in today's churches and ministries.

Instead of encouraging and even honoring hypocritical donors, Christian ministers should expose these people and rebuke them. Of course, churches and ministries are under tremendous pressure to compromise in this area because most Christians are shameless freeloaders, who readily partake of all the benefits given to them by the churches and ministries without so much as lifting a finger to help, and still less do they consider making sacrificial donations. They would prefer for their ministers to starve than to give up going to their favorite restaurants or buying a better television.

Since this selfish attitude prevails among Christians, when those who desire people's admiration and approval practice hypocritical giving, the churches and ministries are under pressure to allow and even encourage it. May God give our ministers the strength to do what is right, and thus to expose and rebuke the hypocritical givers, as well as the shameless freeloaders in our midst.

It is the duty of the rich to give to Christian churches and ministries; rather than having special dinners and conferences to honor them, let them give in private, and let their reward come from God (v. 4). As for the relatively poor or even the destitute, instead of using their poverty as an excuse, let them learn sacrificial giving. And if the ministers themselves do not practice and teach duty and sacrifice, let them admit that they are unworthy of the ministry and resign from office.

When ministers teach on giving, they are often accused of wanting only to *get* people's money out of greed; however, we can just as readily say that these people make this accusation because they want only to *keep* their money, also out of greed. In fact, for every greedy minister, there must be thousands of greedy non-ministers, if for no other reason than that there are many more non-ministers than ministers. Let us then just admit that both ministers and non-ministers can be guilty of greed, and that both are wrong when this happens; however, this fact does not negate the scriptural teachings on duty and sacrifice when it comes to money.

One woman announced on the evening news that her family had been attending her church for several generations, and had donated pews and other things to the church. Because the church was now closing despite her objection, she was demanding a refund for the things that her family had donated, and was even considering taking legal action against the church. This is just one example of how evil professing Christians can be. Of course, those who act this way have probably never been truly converted in the first

place, and they are just acting as any non-Christian might act. In the end, that is all this woman may have ended up with – pews and things – but she had certainly lost God's approval, and probably even her soul.

Jesus commands his followers to be different from the hypocrites. When we give, we must not make a show of it – we must not treat our charitable acts as business transactions to purchase people's admiration and praise.

Some record keeping is unavoidable, and there is nothing wrong with discussing with your husband or wife about how to spend the family's money. An accountant who handles your taxes will certainly know about your charitable donations. The point is not to be like the hypocrites. Your thoughts should be consistent with your actions, so that you act generously because you are indeed generous, and you act spiritually because you are indeed spiritual. You are not just trying to make an impression on other people. Therefore, as much as possible, it is proper to perform your charitable acts in private. If you are just trying to obey God and help people, there is really no need to publicize the donation.

The sinful or unrenewed mind will find ways to sin under all circumstances, and it will distort any divine command to justify its wicked actions and intentions. Thus as we avoid one form of hypocrisy, we must guard against other manifestations of hypocrisy. For example, to say that you should deliberately keep a low profile does not mean that you should make such a big deal over keeping a low profile that everyone knows about it!

Then, a person might at least superficially succeed in obeying Christ's teaching, so that he indeed keeps a low profile when performing his charitable acts, without openly announcing his giving. But having made his donation in private, he might then privately praise and congratulate himself in his "sincere" generosity and obedience. He becomes arrogant precisely because of his apparent humility.

Therefore, it is not enough to keep a low profile, but we must also refrain from self-congratulation and self-righteousness – from constantly dwelling on our own giving, and how we have managed to keep it private (v. 3). Rather, the only proper focus is on pleasing God, and obeying his command to help people. You give because God tells you to be generous, and because you are thankful for his generosity toward you. You desire God's approval instead of people's approval, or even your self-approval.

Jesus' second example is on praying (v. 5-15). Here he contrasts the proper approach to prayer with that of the hypocrites and the pagans.

Just as the hypocrites draw attention to themselves when they perform their charitable acts, they also find ways to get noticed when they pray (v. 5). For example, they may deliberately pray in public places, not because they are suddenly overcome with a sense of spiritual urgency, but because they want other people to see them and then admire them for their apparent piety.

This is hypocritical, because they present themselves as people who are mindful of spiritual things, and who constantly worship and petition God, when in reality they pray only for show, to make an impression on other people. That is, by the way they pray, they convey an impression about themselves that is the very opposite of what they are really like. They are impious and unspiritual, but they wish people to think otherwise.

Again, these hypocrites turn their prayers into business transactions, so that with their effort they purchase other people's admiration. Jesus says that those who pray like this might just get what they want, but nothing more; that is, they might fool observers into thinking that they are indeed spiritual, but God is not deceived, and he does not accept their hypocritical prayers. Spiritually speaking, their prayers are completely futile.

Jesus says that his followers should be different. Rather than doing even your regular prayers before other people to impress them, you should deliberately pray to your Father in private. Of course, this means that you must really pray to the Father out of a sincere reverence and a genuine desire to worship and petition him; no longer are you merely performing in front of other people to gain their applause.

Then, Jesus says that not only must we be different from the religious hypocrites, but we should also be different from the pagans. Of course, the pagans have many faults, but here Jesus specifically refers to how they "keep on babbling" in prayer, because they think that "they will be heard because of their many words" (v. 7). Their error stems from a view of God that is very far from the truth, so that in the context of practicing their religions, they pray to the wrong god in the wrong way. This is true concerning all the members of all non-Christian religions.

Against this, Jesus repeats a common admonition in the Sermon, and says, "Do not be like them"; rather, Christian prayers must be founded upon a biblical view of God, knowing that "your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (v. 8). This is just one example of how the study of systematic theology is absolutely necessary for true Christian piety. Contrary to what many people believe, to belittle theology is not to rescue spirituality, but rather to destroy it altogether.

Instead of praying like the pagans, Jesus gives us a model or outline for prayer that we have come to call the Lord's Prayer (v. 9-13), calling his followers to pray in a way that is consistent with what Scripture reveals about God, his kingdom and providence, and the condition of man. The Lord's Prayer teaches reverence for God's name, concern for his kingdom, dependence on his provision, forgiveness for our neighbors, and deliverance from evil.⁶⁶ As Jesus says later in the Sermon, we are to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (6:33); the form and the content of our prayers often reveal our real concerns and priorities.

⁶⁶ As important as it is, I will refrain from offering an extended exposition on the Lord's Prayer, because I wish to preserve the flow of our present discussion on the Sermon, to remain focused on the main thrust of this section, which is Jesus' teaching on religious hypocrisy, and to avoid making this book even longer. For more on prayer, please see my *Prayer and Revelation*.

Sometimes people want to encourage prayer, and they try to push aside the things that they regard as irrelevant or unimportant, and so instead of carefully studying systematic theology and then developing a theology of prayer, they say, "Just pray!" However, Jesus emphasizes that there is a wrong way to pray, and there is a right way to pray. The former is hypocritical and repetitious; the latter is sincere and succinct. The former follows from a false theology; the latter follows from a biblical theology.

Contrary to what many people think and teach, you cannot get better at praying by praying; rather, you can get better at praying only by reading and thinking about what Scripture teaches – not just about prayer, but about the whole scope of divine revelation, such as the nature of God, the atonement of Christ, the condition of man, and the work of the Spirit.

The disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, *teach us* to pray, just as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Many people think that spiritual things are "caught, not taught," but Scripture teaches the opposite – spiritual things are taught, not caught. Both Jesus and John *taught* their disciples the proper way to pray. They did not teach by "osmosis," and the disciples did not practice "learning by doing." Many Christians are doing a lot of wrong and useless things today, when they should just sit down to *read* a book or *listen* to instruction.

Professing Christians are often hypocritical when they pray. They may deliberately pray in public to be seen by other people, or they may pray long – very long – prayers so that people will hear and admire their apparent spiritual dedication, and possibly even their ability to form beautiful sentences in prayer. However, most of these people are so theologically inept that the longer they pray, the less likely they are to fool the biblically informed. I am more impressed by the patience of those who endure such long and stupid prayers – but not by much, since they should correct this hypocritical person rather than tolerate him.

Some people bow their heads in prayer before their meals in public places, which is fine if this is really their custom, and if they are offering sincere thanks to God. But some of them do this to be seen by others. When they incite admiration in others, they feel spiritual; when they incite disdain and anger, they feel heroic. Either way, they are praying in public only to generate a response in others, and not as a sincere act of worship and thanksgiving. When this is the case, it is better not to pray at all. Instead, they should return to the privacy of their own homes, and see if they are still interested in praying. Then, some people may say, "Praise the Lord" or "Thank you, Jesus," when they are not really praising the Lord or thanking Jesus at all; instead, they are just saying this for effect. This is also hypocritical.

By extension, it is possible to commit the same type of hypocrisy when people perform other acts of worship, such as when they sing at church. In many churches, especially those that emphasize more emotional songs and exuberant singing, we may find people who are singing with tears on their faces, kneeling down, or prostrate on the floor. None of these may be wrong in itself, but as many as those who do these things out of a desire

to appear spiritual, or to appear as if they have received a special touch from God, they are hypocrites. They are not spiritual people, but they are just actors, and sometimes very bad ones. The next time you see someone who forces himself to burst out in tears in church, or to assume a badly contrived pious posture, you will know who is *not* spiritual.

The third example of religious hypocrisy is on fasting (v. 16-18). In keeping with their pattern, when the hypocrites fast, they make sure that everyone knows about it. They deliberately make themselves look distressed and unkempt. The Jews would smear their faces with ashes, making it obvious that they are "humbling" themselves. All they want is other people's admiration, and Jesus says that they will get exactly what they are after, but nothing more (v. 16).

In contrast to these hypocrites, Jesus calls his followers to be different. Rather than announcing your fast to everyone, he says to take certain practical measures "so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting." Instead of deliberately looking distraught and untidy, make yourself look clean and cheerful, so that you may practice sincere self-denial and self-discipline, dedicate your time to worship and prayer, and show mercy to the poor and the hungry (Isaiah 58:6-9).

Jesus' description of hypocritical fasting may appear almost comical to some people, but he is not exaggerating, for people indeed practice fasting for show, both in his day and in ours. A number of years ago, I knew a person who fasted occasionally. Sometimes he would announce it shortly before beginning the fast. Then, when someone would ask him about lunch or dinner, he would put on a frown and rub his stomach, complaining that although he was famished, he could not eat because he was on a fast. Sometimes, he would say this even when no one asked. He was a hypocrite, and his fasting had no spiritual value. If we do not watch ourselves, we might find ourselves also practicing the same type of religious hypocrisy, possibly in some other area of piety, even if not in fasting.

Christians are often accused of being hypocrites. You might have heard people say, "The church is full of hypocrites!" or "Christians are hypocrites, and I don't want to have anything to do with them!" This is usually said not only as a criticism against individual Christians, but against most or even all Christians, and it is often intended as a criticism against Christianity itself. The reasoning seems to be that Christianity is unworthy of belief because Christians are hypocrites.

In evaluating this accusation, it is important to remind ourselves of what it means to be a hypocrite. We have said that the hypocrite is an actor – he is a person who presents himself as something or someone that he is not, or who presents himself as believing something that he does not really believe. This is not just my private definition, but it agrees with the definition given in a regular English dictionary, and it agrees with the biblical usage of the term.

We must also specify what it means to be a Christian. I would insist that we must find our definition of a Christian from the Bible. If our definition is entirely private, then there is

nothing to stop it from being entirely arbitrary. That is, if "Christian" means whatever you want it to mean, then you can call a Buddhist or even an atheist a "Christian," but then any of your criticisms against "Christians" would no longer apply to followers of the biblical religion; rather, it will be applicable only to the sort of people you designate as Christians, namely, Buddhists or atheists. When that happens, there is no longer any need to defend Christianity against the accusation of hypocrisy, since the accusation has become irrelevant.

For our purpose, we will loosely but correctly define a Christian as a person who has been sovereignly chosen and genuinely changed by God, and who exhibits his true faith in Christ both in creed and in conduct. This is not an attempt to make the definition narrow, but it is how the Bible itself defines a Christian. Without providing a thorough biblical justification for this definition, I will appeal to what I have already written thus far on the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus specifies that his disciples must have a righteousness surpassing that of the Pharisees and the scribes, in that they must truly affirm and follow the demands of the law.⁶⁷

With the above in mind, we may now ask, what makes a *Christian a hypocrite*? At the least, we may say the following. First, he must really be a Christian as defined by the Bible. Second, for this Christian to be a hypocrite, he must present himself as something or someone that he is not, or he must present himself as believing something that he does not really believe.

Now, when people accuse Christians of being hypocrites, what do they have in mind? What do Christians claim to be that they are not? And what do they claim to believe that they do not? In other words, what do Christians pretend to be? And what do they pretend to believe?

Suppose a person tells you that he is a Christian, and suppose that he knows and affirms at least all the basic doctrines in the Bible. Then, if he sins, can you now call him a hypocrite? Except in a very narrow sense, you cannot call him a hypocrite, since a person who truly affirms all the basic doctrines in the Bible will be the first to tell you that Scripture does not say that Christians are perfect and sinless, and because of this, Christians themselves do not claim to be perfect and sinless.

Therefore, when the Christian sins, he is doing exactly what he tells you that he would at least occasionally do. This in turn means that he does not present himself as something or someone that he is not, or that he believes something that he does not. He presents himself as someone who has been changed by God, but who still struggles with sin in his

⁶⁷ Jesus does not say that the Pharisees are hypocrites but nevertheless the true people of God; rather, he says that they are hypocrites and thus cannot escape being condemned to hell (Matthew 23:33). Therefore, to attack the Pharisees is not to attack the religion revealed through Moses, since the Pharisees did not in fact affirm or obey what Moses had written. Likewise, to attack "Christians" who are truly and consistently hypocritical is not to attack Christianity or Christians, but to attack *non-Christians* who are pretending to be Christians.

continuing pursuit of holiness. The occasional sin that you observe in his life is exactly what he tells you to expect from him. Where, then, is the hypocrisy?

On the other hand, if a person claims to be a Christian, but at the same time also claims to be perfect and sinless, then he is not holding to biblical teaching at all. Whatever criticism that you level against him after that is irrelevant to the biblical religion – it is only applicable to him as an individual, not to all Christians or to Christianity itself. Christian teaching does not say that Christians are sinless; therefore, a professing Christian is not a hypocrite unless he claims to be sinless when he is not really sinless.

Likewise, a person who claims to be a Christian, but who denies even the basic doctrines of the Bible such as biblical inerrancy, cannot rightly be said to be a representative of the biblical religion. Otherwise, I can discredit atheism just by claiming to be an atheist and then murdering several people. Probably no one would accept this as a legitimate proof against atheism, but when it comes to attacking Christianity, people suddenly consider this way of arguing legitimate and compelling.

If you use or accept this kind of arguments, you are a total buffoon. The argument of hypocrisy may discredit the person, but not necessarily the worldview that he *claims* to affirm, unless there is something inherent in the worldview that necessarily produces self-contradictory beliefs or actions. However, when this is the case – that is, if the worldview itself is self-contradictory – then the proper approach is to deal with the content of the worldview itself. Thus the argument of hypocrisy is almost always irrelevant when we are arguing about a worldview instead of about a person.

Now, if a person claims to be righteous, but he habitually commits murder, theft, adultery, perjury, and other such things, then he is in fact not a Christian. The Bible would not admit that he is a Christian, and I would not admit that he is a Christian. Of course, this person has the ability to *say* that he is a Christian, or anything else, for that matter, just as I have the ability to *say* that I am a dog, a tree, or even an atheist, but the ability to say that I am these things does not make me any of these things. Therefore, a "Christian" who murders, steals, and lies, is really a *non-Christian* who is killing, stealing, and lying. The fact that he pretends to be a Christian does not make him one.

If I say that I am a mathematics teacher, but upon questioning and observing me, I show no sign of teaching or even understanding mathematics, then the logical conclusion is that I am not really a mathematics teacher, even though I claim to be one. You cannot then go out and tell people that mathematics teachers are hypocrites, since it is precisely a person who is *not* a mathematics teacher who is pretending to be something that he is not. Likewise, an essentially hypocritical person, that is, one who is truly and consistently hypocritical, is not a Christian, but a non-Christian.

Therefore, unless those who accuse Christians of hypocrisy can actually prove that they are referring to true Christians rather than imposters, these hypocrites should be numbered among the non-Christians. Thus we answer:

"Non-Christians, you hypocrites! You are not Christians, but many of you present yourselves as Christians. Then, when some of you inevitably reveal your true evil character, you accuse Christians for being hypocrites, when you are the ones pretending to be something that you are not.

"Non-Christians, you hypocrites! When you accuse other people for being hypocrites just to excuse your unbelief and disobedience, then you are the hypocrites, and you have no right to judge other people for being hypocrites. You are just like the people you judge, and probably much worse.

"Non-Christians, you hypocrites! When you accuse someone who claims to be a Christian, but who does not believe or follow the teachings of Scripture, you are in fact accusing a non-Christian who merely pretends to be a Christian. You are in fact accusing one of your own, and exposing one of your own as a hypocrite. As many as these 'Christians' that you accuse of hypocrisy, you are accusing that many *non-Christians* of hypocrisy.

"Non-Christians, you hypocrites! You often say things like, 'History is full of atrocities committed by Christians in the name of Christ.' But unless you can prove that these were really Christians in a way that we must accept, that is, according to our own biblical definition, you are just falsely assuming that anyone who claims to be a Christian is really a Christian. Rather, biblical teaching denies that these were Christians, so that we can just as easily say, 'History is full of atrocities committed by *non-Christians* misusing the name of Christ.'"

As with the so-called "problem of evil," the accusation of hypocrisy is one of the most common but overrated arguments against Christianity. And as with the problem of evil, it is also one of the most obviously irrational and outright idiotic arguments. Therefore, let Christians stop being intimidated by the foolish arguments and intellectual sophistry of the non-Christians, and proceed to devastate unbelief by the wisdom and power of Christ.

MATERIALISM (Matthew 6:19-34)

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Jesus has been expounding on the superior righteousness that he demands from his disciples, and the passage that we now take up still falls within the large section bracketed by the inclusio, "The Law and the Prophets" (5:17, 7:12). Therefore, we must not suppose that Jesus has altogether altered the direction of his Sermon; rather, we must read our passage in the context of the same overarching theme.

Since the beginning of the Sermon, Jesus has been calling for his disciples to be different from the world, and to be a counter-cultural force. This entails adopting beliefs and practices that are radically different from the hypocrites and the pagans.

The hypocrites are those who claim to obey God's law, but in reality they do everything they can to undermine and subvert it (5:21-48). They claim to honor and worship God, but in reality they are seeking only the admiration of men (6:1-18). Religious hypocrites are in essence not different from the pagans, only that the pagans are more explicitly non-Christian. Jesus now proceeds to discuss something that the pagans are more obviously concerned about, but we already know that greed also fills the hearts of religious hypocrites (Matthew 23:25). The most important point is not to clearly distinguish the distinctive sins of each group, but to know that Jesus calls us to differ from both. In other words, Jesus demands the believers to be different from all kinds of unbelievers, having a different kind of religion and a different set of priorities.

Just as the religious hypocrites are interested in establishing a reputation of piety with people, with relatively little regard for how God perceives them, the pagans – religious or not – are obsessed with accumulating treasures on earth rather than in heaven. This perspective is unwise and shortsighted (6:19-20), but it characterizes the hearts of non-

Christians. They focus on earthly treasures because their hearts are bound to the earth. But Jesus teaches us to turn our hearts to heaven, and accumulate our treasures there (v. 21).

Then, Jesus offers a metaphor that may seem obscure to some (v. 22-23), but it is not too difficult to understand when we read it in its context. The eye is a metaphor for the heart, which leads the whole self. Jesus contrasts the "good" eyes against the "bad" eyes. The word translated "good" is *haplous*, as opposed to *diplous*, which means double (1 Timothy 5:17). In its present context, as well as in biblical usage elsewhere, the word also implies generosity and liberality (Romans 12:8; James 1:5).

Therefore, a "good" or "single" eye refers to both a detached attitude toward wealth and an undivided loyalty toward God. Indeed, Jesus has just finished speaking about the former (v. 19-21), and he is about to speak on the latter (v. 24). The "evil" eye, of course, refers to the opposite of what is represented by the good eye, and Jesus says that it will ruin the whole self, causing it to be "full of darkness."

Although it is possible to work for two employers, it is impossible to serve two masters, since by definition a master owns the slave. Jesus represents a person as a slave to either God or Money. The word translated "Money" is *mammon*, which refers to wealth and property, and is here personified as a slave owner. You will either be a slave to God or to Money, and to serve Money rather than God is more than greed – it is also idolatry. As Paul writes, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and *greed, which is idolatry*" (Colossians 3:5). Just as a Christian must not worship pagan idols, a Christian must serve God rather than Money.

Verse 25 begins with the word "therefore," connecting what follows (v. 25-34) with what Jesus has just finished saying (v. 19-24). The command, "do not worry," thus follows from the previous verses. That is, because you cannot serve two masters, because you will serve either God or Money, and because serving Money is idolatry, *therefore* "do not worry about your life."

In other words, idolatry is rooted in the mind. Ezekiel refers to some who have "set up idols in their hearts" (Ezekiel 14:3), and whose "hearts were devoted to their idols" (20:16). Worrying about material things is one symptom of Mammon worship. But then, biblical worship, the opposite of idolatry, is thus also rooted in the mind, so that worry is later contrasted with faith in our passage (v. 30).

The necessary implication is that in turning people from their idols to God, and in helping people progress in sanctification, the proper approach is to apply God's word to the mind through biblical argumentation. This is what Jesus does in the verses that follow. As I have extensively argued elsewhere, Paul also uses this approach in evangelism and in teaching, and he writes that true worship and transformation comes from the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:1-2).

Jesus uses a rhetorical question to state that the life and the body is more important than mere food and clothing. Elsewhere, also in the context of opposing "all kinds of greed," he states, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Since life is more than food, clothing, and possessions, we should not preoccupy ourselves with these things.

You may say, "Although life is more than food and clothing, it is certainly not less than food and clothing. Thus we still need these things, don't we? But if they are difficult to come by, then we would naturally worry about them." Jesus responds from the biblical doctrines of divine providence (v. 26-30) and divine omniscience (v. 31-32), and this again reminds us that theology is the foundation of spirituality.

His answer includes two *a fortiori* arguments. To paraphrase, the first one says, "God feeds the birds; you are more important than the birds; therefore, God will also feed you" (see v. 26). And the second one says, "God clothes the grass; you are more important than the grass; therefore, God will also cloth you" (see v. 28-30).

He also reminds us that we cannot change our lives by worrying (v. 27). In effect, he is saying, "You worry about your life, about food and clothing, as if by worrying you will make a difference; but worrying will not change your life, and it is powerless to obtain food and clothing for you; therefore, do not worry." Finally, Jesus argues against worry by reminding his hearers about the knowledge and benevolence of God (v. 32). As Christians, we do not need to "run after all these things" as the pagans do, as if it completely depends on us to obtain them because God does not know or care about what we need.

Jesus calls his followers to be different from the unbelievers, and he reinforces this point by making numerous contrasts. Without repeating all that he has said since the beginning of the Sermon, since 6:19, he has contrasted earthly treasures against heavenly treasures, the good eyes and the evil eyes, God and Money, and now he contrasts faith against worry. The pagans are characterized by their worry about material things, and instead of imitating them, Christians should be characterized by faith in their Father's provision. Thus instead of revolving their lives around the pursuit of material things, Christians are to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" – that is, to actively promote his rule and obey his will.

When challenged with this verse, one person said that since great wealth will help promote the kingdom of God, to seek first the kingdom of God means to strive first to become wealthy, so that one may give large amounts of money to churches and ministries. However, this is to promote the very attitude that Jesus has been opposing since verse 19! He commands us to "seek first his kingdom" (v. 33) precisely to forbid us from first seeking wealth. To seek the kingdom first is to *not* seek wealth first; to serve God is to *not* serve Money. To justify his lust and greed, this person practiced the same subversive "exegesis" as the Pharisees and the scribes, and thus subjecting himself to the same condemnation.

Jesus teaches us to have faith in God, because God knows and cares about our needs. But having faith does not mean that we will never experience problems. Jesus embeds this point in his final statement against worry, and says, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (v. 34). He does not say, "Do not worry about the future, because no trouble will come," but rather, "Do not worry about the future, because you already have enough trouble today!" Faith does not exempt us from difficult situations, but it will keep us conscious of God's power, knowledge, and benevolence toward us as we encounter them.

JUDGMENT (Matthew 7:1-6)

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

Jesus has been expounding on the strict demands of the law, and by this time certainly none of us emerges unscathed or innocent. Instead, probably all of us are guilty of all the sins that Jesus has mentioned. For the same reason – that is, precisely because God's standard of righteousness is so high and strict – if we wish to maliciously attack other people, we will find ample ammunition from the Sermon on the Mount. However, to do this would be to disregard the very ethic that Jesus has been teaching us; it would be to become like the Pharisees and the scribes, the very people that Jesus warns us not to imitate.

So now Jesus proceeds, as if to answer the question, "In light of what I have been teaching, what should be your attitude toward one another?" His answer is, "Do not judge." As the Sermon approaches its conclusion, this is an extremely important lesson, teaching us how to relate to one another in the light of its teaching. Yet, instead of being correctly taught and followed, ours is one of the most abused passages in the entire Bible.

Non-Christians, and even some professing Christians, often use our passage to assert that we should not make any moral judgments or evaluations of other people at all, and they do not hesitate to *judge* those who make such judgments and evaluations as judgmental, disobeying Jesus' command in this passage. One man said, "Jesus taught that we should never say that someone is wrong." But of course, this man readily accused those he considered judgmental as utterly wicked and unspiritual.

In any case, the interpretation that Jesus forbids all moral judgments is an impossible one. It contradicts not only the explicit or implicit teaching of hundreds of other biblical passages (Matthew 18:15-17; John 7:24; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:1-4), but it contradicts what Jesus says in the next several verses, for he does not stop at verses 1-2, but he proceeds to explain what he means.

When we read on, we immediately see that Jesus is talking about *hypocritical* judgment, and in this context, *only* hypocritical judgment. We have already defined what it means to be a hypocrite – he is an actor, presenting himself as something or someone that he is not, or as believing something that he does not.

Jesus says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?...*You hypocrite...*" (v. 3, 5). This person points to the fault in another person, but disregard the even bigger fault in himself. One ready example, of course, is the non-Christian who judges the Christian for being judgmental. But the context in verses 3-5 seems to mainly address the relationships between the followers of Christ, although the principle may apply in other relationships as well. In any case, we will get to the unbelievers soon enough (v. 6).

We need to make clear that Jesus does not at all forbid making moral judgments, but again, what he forbids is *hypocritical* judgment. He says, "*first* take the plank out of your own eye, *and then* you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." *First* examine yourself, *and then* (not "never") you will have the spiritual vision by which to help your brother. In other words, do not use the Sermon on the Mount to criticize everyone except yourself; rather, *first* examine yourself in the light of its teaching, *and then* proceed to help other people, but nevertheless not with a malicious and destructive attitude.

Moving on to verse 6, "dogs" and "pigs" are derogatory terms applied to unbelievers. The dogs here are not friendly household pets, but vicious scavenger dogs. And of course, pigs are considered unclean animals. Jesus warns us against giving sacred and valuable things to the likes of dogs and pigs. Although this may apply to all spiritually obstinate people in principle, the primary application is probably to unbelievers who stubbornly and repeatedly resist the gospel. As Jesus says here, instead of appreciating the gospel message and its messenger, these unbelievers will "turn and tear you to pieces" – perhaps by quoting Matthew 7:1 to denounce you as a judgmental and narrow-minded bigot! But Jesus allows us to see them as they are – vicious dogs and filthy pigs.

If you are a Christian, then before I warn or even rebuke you about a certain sin that I perceive in your life, I should first examine myself, lest my own moral shortcomings (perhaps even greater than yours) are obscuring my spiritual vision, causing me to make false or hypocritical judgments about you. After I have carefully examined myself, then I may, and in many cases should, warn or rebuke you about your sin. Scripture regards this practice as good and noble, not harsh or judgmental: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a

multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). However I go about it, I should not for one moment suggest that I am perfect or sinless.

On the other hand, if you are a non-Christian, and if I am a true Christian, then although I still need to constantly examine myself before God, I am never hypocritical when I speak to you about your sin and about your need for salvation. This is because as a Christian, I have by definition acknowledged the same thing in myself that I am now trying to get you to acknowledge.

In addition, if you were to stubbornly and repeatedly resist the gospel, then I am not hypocritical to address you as a dog or a pig, because I freely acknowledge that I would have been just like a dog or a pig before conversion, if I had resisted the gospel like you are now doing.

That is, if you persist in your unbelief despite my repeated efforts to persuade you, then I am to treat you like the dog or pig that you are. Instead of cheapening the sacred gospel by offering it to dogs like you, and instead of continuing to creating occasions for pigs like you to blaspheme, I am to move on to other people (Matthew 10:14; Luke 10:10-12; Acts 13:44-46, 18:5-6). Of course I know that people are offended by these expressions, and it is strange that even professing Christians are offended, since these are biblical expressions. Do you suppose that the Sermon on the Mount pleased everybody? And do you suppose that the pagans were fond of being called dogs and pigs even by Christ?

Non-Christians are fond of using Matthew 7:1 when they try to silence our outcry against their depraved conducts and gross perversions. However, as we have seen, they can do this only by severely distorting the express meaning of the passage, and by suppressing verse 6 altogether. Then, they turn and judge us for being judgmental. Rather than being intimidated and manipulated, we should reply:

"You hypocrites! You distort Christ's words to forbid all moral judgments against you, when you nevertheless harshly judge Christians for being judgmental. In doing so, you expose and condemn yourself.

"You cowards! You claim to be the intellectual leaders of this world, but you are nothing more than stupid dogs and dirty pigs! Rather than hiding behind a distorted understanding of Christ's words, why don't you confront the claims of the gospel, and refute us if you can? Or is it because you know in your heart that the gospel is true, and instead of overcoming our arguments, you can only escape their convicting power by running away?"⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Those who have any interest in Chinese literature should read *The True Story of Ah Q*. Ah Q was a fool; he would lose a fight, but then convinces himself that he has won, and that he remains superior to the person who has just beaten him. Non-Christians often behave like this even when Christians demolish them in debates. Instead of admitting defeat, they will give all kinds of excuses and still claim to be superior. One solution is to drag "Ah Q" back into the fight and beat him until he lets go of this illusion of

Many non-Christians have learned fragments of biblical passages here and there, often incorrectly quoted or understood, and they will often use them against you. Some of them have even read the Bible, and they will try to intimidate and manipulate you with their blatant misuse of Scripture.

Rather than being reduced to silence or bullied into submission, you must boldly challenge their use of Scripture. Demand that they point to the exact reference where the passage is found. Demand that they provide at least an elementary exegesis to support the way that they use that passage. Demand that they clearly define the important terms in the passage and justify the definitions. Then, demand that they show the relevance between the passage, rightly interpreted, and your situation or topic of discussion.

If they cannot fulfill the above reasonable and in fact necessary demands, then you have just uncovered their intellectual dishonesty and incompetence. Rather than letting them push you around while they abuse Scripture and distort its teachings, let them know that if they continue to misuse the Bible to intimidate or manipulate you, they will surely be exposed and embarrassed.

Some of the misinterpretations of Scripture have been used by non-Christians for so long that even many professing Christians have adopted them. A sinful cowardice, and a false understanding of love and gentleness (also reinforced by the non-Christians), have immobilized Christians, so that they do little to nothing to confront and challenge the rampant misuse of the Bible by unbelievers.

We must put such foolishness to an end. If the non-Christians dare to hijack the Bible to manipulate us, then let them competently and coherently argue from it. When they fail, let us bring their error to light for everyone to see, loudly saying, "Look everybody! These unbelievers could not win by debating the issues themselves, and so they tried to manipulate and silence us by distorting Scripture, but even then they could not provide a simple exegetical argument to make a way of escape. Now they are trapped and their dishonesty and incompetence are exposed for all to see."

SEEKING (Matthew 7:7-11)

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

superiority, or until he dies holding on to it. When appropriate, this is what we should do to the non-Christians – intellectually speaking, of course.

Because no one appears perfect and sinless in the light of the Sermon on the Mount, if we try to use it to find fault with other people, then we will certainly be successful. But if this is all that we do with it, then we have missed its purpose, since Jesus is speaking to us as his individual disciples, so that we may grasp the strict demands of the law, and pursue a true righteousness that is superior to the false and hypocritical righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes.

Therefore, we should first examine ourselves in the light of the Sermon, and then help our fellow disciples. Of course, it is not that we must be entirely perfect before we say anything about another person's sins, but the point is that we should not be hypocritical, disregarding our own sins and pretending that we are perfect.

However, when we examine ourselves by the Sermon on the Mount, we invariably discover that God's standard of righteousness is impossible to attain by our own power, but this is the standard by which God judges everyone. If left unchanged and without a way of escape, all sinners would be doomed to endless suffering in hell. But God made a way to justify us apart from the works of the law, that is, by faith in the work of Christ.

At regeneration, God puts his Spirit into us, giving us the power to obey. As he has said by the prophet Ezekiel, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27). Then, Paul writes, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). Christian obedience begins at conversion – it is not to begin later as one matures, and it is certainly not optional.

This obedience is to continue in us, but if we have correctly understood what Jesus has said so far in the Sermon, we will know that none of us have developed very far in the righteousness that he demands. Those of us who have been truly converted, although we have been thoroughly justified by the imputed righteousness of Christ, will always be dissatisfied as long as we continue to fall short of God's standard. Thus the Sermon, rather than encouraging us to practice hypocritical faultfinding, instead drives us to persistently seek and petition God for his grace and his help.

Accordingly, Jesus tells us to literally "keep on asking," "keep on seeking," and "keep on knocking" (v. 7). Although many commentators relate this passage only to prayer, I am unsure that Jesus intends to limit what he says here this way. Both the action and the result in, "Ask and it will be given to you," obviously apply to prayer. However, Jesus does not stop here, but he continues to say, "Seek and you will find" and "Knock and the door will be opened to you." Both actions do not seem to be necessarily limited to prayer, and the two results certainly seem to be applicable to other things besides prayer.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Although it is entirely possible that Jesus is using the common rhetorical device of repetition to reinforce the same idea, it remains that the expressions in this passage does not seem to absolutely restrict the applicable to prayer alone.

Although he does not make a point of it, Carson seems to agree, since he thinks that "seek" refers to an "active, diligent pursuit of God's way."⁷⁰ Thus even if the predominant idea here is persistent prayer, the teaching is not limited to prayer, but may also include all the biblically approved ways of seeking God, such as study and fellowship.

Therefore, although God's standard of righteousness is very high, it should not drive the children of God to utter desperation; rather, it should incite them to actively and persistently ask, seek, and knock. Their efforts will not be for nothing, because Jesus promises that those who persistently ask and seek, will receive and find (v. 8).

Then, Jesus reinforces this teaching with an *a fortiori* argument in verses 9-11. Here, he is saying, in effect, "If you who are with sin nevertheless show general benevolence to your children, instead of mocking them when they ask from you, and since God the Father is altogether righteous and perfect, then how much more will he not mock but rather grant good things to those who ask from him!"

Verses 9-11 make an important qualification to verses 7-8. Jesus is not promising that any human being who asks for anything at all will receive what he asks, as long as he seeks it with persistence. Instead, he is addressing the children of God, that is, those who can call God "Father." Therefore, the primary application of this passage excludes non-Christians.

Then, Jesus says that both a human parent and the heavenly Father are willing to give "good gifts" to their children. Just as you will never give your son a snake when he asks for a fish, neither will you give him a gun even if he persistently asks for it, or a bottle of poison even if he persistently seeks it. In the illustration, the son asks for "bread" and "fish" – things that are good for him, and right for him to have. Likewise, the Father will give "good gifts" to his children, not least of which are the qualities described in the Beatitudes, and the power to increasingly conform to his will by obeying his commandments.

SUMMARY (Matthew 7:12)

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus now concludes the main body of the Sermon by stating what some have called the Golden Rule. In Bible translations that group the verses into paragraphs, this verse is usually attached to verses 9-11; however, it is quite clear that Jesus is applying the statement to the entire section starting from 5:17 to the present verse. First, the message of the verse, "do to others what you would have them do to you," echoes a recurring point that Jesus has made throughout the Sermon. Second, the verse obviously serves as the closing bracket of the *inclusio* on "the Law and the Prophets" (5:17, 7:12).

⁷⁰ Carson, *Matthew*; p. 186.

Jesus says that the statement "sums up" the Law and the Prophets. In other words, it is a *summary* of the Old Testament ethical teachings. Now, a summary is a *summary*. People usually understand what that means and implies in other contexts, but when it comes to spiritual things, they often become dull and confused.

So I even heard one preacher say that since this commandment sums up all the ethical commandments, this means that, "If you know and keep this commandment, you don't need all the other commandments." If this is true, then Jesus only needs to speak on this one commandment whenever he touches on ethical issues, but contrary to this, he has just expounded on a number of other commandments in considerable depth and detail.

To illustrate, if I were to write a set of safety guidelines for operating a powerful and dangerous piece of machinery, and I conclude the manual by stating, "In *summary*, take the necessary precautions to protect yourself and others from injuries." Most people would probably not conclude from this that they should discard all the guidelines that I have written, and think that the summary alone is sufficient. What are the "necessary precautions"? What type of injuries may result if these precautions are not taken? What am I to protect myself from? The necessary precautions are defined by what harm the equipment can potentially cause. So is it possible for this piece of machinery to explode, release toxic fumes, sever limbs, or what? The summary is good for what it intends to do, and that is to give you a simple way to coherently learn and practice the *details*.

In addition, to isolate verse 12 from the rest of Scripture's ethical teachings is to expose it to all sorts of distortions from which it would otherwise be immune. For example, suppose that you are an alcoholic, so that you crave alcohol almost all the time. If we completely isolate the words, "Do to others what you would have them do to you," then this could mean that it is your moral obligation to serve alcohol to everyone that you meet, including babies and children. However, this would be to twist the verse in the very manner that Jesus has been opposing throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

Another example may be a person who wants to die. He considers death a relief, and he hopes that someone would end his life. Now, if we completely isolate the words, "Do to others what you would have them to do you," this would translate into a moral obligation on his part to kill as many people as he can. However, Jesus has already expounded on the commandment against murder (5:21-26), so 7:12 should not be subject to such a perverse usage at all.

A summary is a *summary*, not a *substitute*. By definition, a summary leaves out *most* of the details, so that to correctly carry out what the summary points to, one must learn and apply the relevant details in each case. Therefore, just because 7:12 is a *summary* of the Law and the Prophets, it does not mean that we may discard all that Jesus has said so far in the Sermon, nor may we disregard the ethical teachings in the rest of Scripture. In fact, to correctly obey 7:12, we must diligently learn and apply all the details which the verse summarizes. To isolate the summary and discard the details is to render the summary itself useless.

With the above in mind, verse 12 reinforces something that Jesus has already stressed in the previous passages. That is, although the moral law forbids us to harm other people, it goes beyond that to command deliberate and active consideration and even sacrifice for the sake of their welfare. It is not enough to be harmless, stay out of trouble, and leave people alone; rather, we must actively and sacrificially help them. Actively do for others what is good for you. This is a *summary*, but not a *substitute*, of God's moral commandments.

3. CONCLUSION

As Jesus brings his Sermon to a close, he specifies the impact and the difference that it should make in the lives of his hearers. Are his words to be merely heard and admired, but then forgotten? Can one be a true disciple who hears but does not obey them? Are the Father's arms opened wide, ready to welcome anyone who nonchalantly wanders into his embrace? Or, is the way to the kingdom restrictive and hard to find? To illustrate his answer, and to conclude the Sermon, Jesus uses several pairs of contrasts: the two ways (v. 13-14), the two trees (v. 15-20), and the two builders (v. 21-27).⁷¹

TWO WAYS (Matthew 7:13-14)

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Many professing Christians are imposters – you are probably one of them. Other than the "Christian" label, almost nothing in their lives resembles anything remotely Christian. Since these imposters are really non-Christians posing as Christians, they cannot avoid smuggling unbiblical beliefs and practices into their false versions of Christianity. Thus one of the things that these imposters do in every generation is to take whatever ethical standard or norm that is popular in the non-Christian world, and bring it into the church by claiming that it is really a Christian ethical standard or norm.

One of the ideas that non-Christians have smuggled into the church, with barely noticeable resistance coming from the Christian community, is the teaching that Christianity is really one of the most open, tolerant, and inclusive religions in existence. That is, Christianity provides the most number of options, embraces all different kinds of people without demanding fundamental changes from them, and makes the way of salvation easy, broad, and non-restrictive.

However, even many non-Christians are not fooled by this nonsense; rather, it is obvious to them that Christianity is the most exclusive, restrictive, and narrow religion there is. But when they criticize Christianity for being too narrow and intolerant, even some Christian apologists scramble to say that Christianity may not be as narrow and intolerant as it seems.

If anything, the truth is that Christianity is much more narrow and intolerant than most Christians and non-Christians know. When people bring this up to attack our faith, the

⁷¹ Carson divides 7:13-27 into four sections: two ways (v. 13-14), two trees (v. 15-20), two claims (v. 21-23), and two builders (v. 24-27). See Carson, *Matthew*; p. 188. In what follows, I attach v. 21-23 to v. 24-27, which, judging by the content of these verses, seems to be at least permissible, if not preferable.

first response from Christian apologists should not be to dilute or explain away this truth, but rather to say, "That's a statement, not an argument. So what if Christianity is narrow? You may not like it, but that in itself does not make Christianity wrong. So what if Christianity is exclusive? What are you going to do about it? What can you do?"

Sometimes Christians rush to defend a certain doctrine when the non-Christians have not even started their attack – simply pointing to something that we teach is different from giving a well-reasoned argument against it. They say, "You Christians believe that God sends people to hell!" And the Christians hurry to respond, "Yeah, but...," and then proceeding to make up some unbiblical nonsense to defend it, as if we should be embarrassed about the doctrine.

Rather, we should say, "Yes, but so what? You haven't given an argument against it. It is obvious that you dislike the doctrine, but that doesn't make it wrong. I dislike your beliefs a lot more, does that mean I win the debate? Precisely what is wrong with hell? Is it unfair? According to whom? Is it harsh? According to what? Why don't you give me a real argument, starting from premises that you can show to be true, and that inevitably lead to your conclusion?" Hell is not a doctrine that we should be timid about, or hide from people – it displays the glory of God's justice and wrath!

Jesus explains that the road to destruction is wide and broad – it is a big, open road. It is easy and comfortable. It provides many options, it emphasizes diversity and tolerance, and embraces many beliefs, even if they fundamentally contradict one another. It is inclusive and pluralistic, and it does not offend. On this road, you will find many companions, willing to accept you as you are, without demanding you to change your beliefs and repent of your sins. What sins? That is an ugly word that they do not use. After all, everything is relative, so who are they to judge you? People love to travel on this road. Best of all, it is very easy to find – you are probably already on it.

Then, there is this other road. It is small and narrow, and often difficult to travel on. It allows for only one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God (Ephesians 4:4-6). It is completely intolerant of diverse beliefs. It is exclusive and offensive, and it claims total control of all aspects of your life. And there is no room for you to smuggle in your private thoughts and secret sins – you must leave all that behind. In fact, you must renounce all your previous beliefs and actions as futile and wicked. Although there are other travelers on this road, you will often seem alone, walking in the opposite direction that others are going. People hate the very idea of this road, and only a few people even find it.

Nevertheless, one road leads to destruction and the other leads to life; to those whom God has chosen, the choice is clear – they will "enter through the narrow gate" and persevere until they reach their destination. As for all the others – idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, slanderers, liars, sorcerers, unbelievers, murderers – they will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven, but instead they will suffer endless torment in the fiery lake of burning sulfur, where there will forever be no options, no escape, and no pardon (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 21:8).

Jesus has made clear the true demands of the law, and the true meaning of righteousness. Now he tells us what his teaching necessarily implies about true discipleship. The reprobates say that there are many ways to God, but instead, Jesus says that there are many ways to hell, but only one narrow way to life. To those who would be his true disciples, although the road may be difficult and unpopular, he teaches, "Enter through the narrow gate."

TWO TREES (Matthew 7:15-20)

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."

Watch out! Watch out for false prophets. Warnings about false prophets are widely applicable, and this one is no exception. However, since this one is placed within the context of the Sermon and immediately after the teaching on the narrow way, it means that we must note its relationship to the Sermon in general, and to the teaching on the narrow way in particular. But before that, let us first see what Jesus and several other biblical passages say about false prophets.

The false prophets will come to you "in sheep's clothing." Sheep is a metaphor for God's people. Among other things, they are generally gentle and trusting followers of their shepherd, and they need their shepherd to guide and protect them, and to bring them to green pastures to feed. And because of their amiable nature, sometimes sheep can be a little gullible.

By covering themselves with sheep skin, the false prophets make themselves appear as if they are Christians. In many ways, they look just like the real thing. They appear as understanding and compassionate people. In fact, they can be so accommodating that they will even modify the church's doctrines and practices to avoid making you feel inferior, and they will redefine biblical discipleship so that you can call yourself a disciple without making even the smallest changes in your life.

However, in reality, these people are "ferocious wolves" – enemies and predators of the sheep. They are not there to promote right worship and holy conduct, but their aim is to devour your faith and erode the church from within. They are the opposite of what they present themselves to be.

We need to be forewarned and prepared. Jesus says that we will recognize these false prophets "by their fruit." This is a metaphor for the natural and necessary outworking of one's inner life. An apple tree produces apples, not oranges or some other kind of fruit, so

that when you see apples on a tree, it means that the tree is an apple tree, not some other kind of tree.

Likewise, no matter what a person claims about himself, the kind of spiritual fruit that he produces betrays his true spiritual condition. Although the false prophets come in sheep's clothing, in reality they are ferocious wolves. This superficial cover does not change their nature, so what is on the inside will manifest itself on the outside in various ways. Because they are wolves, they will exhibit certain behaviors of wolves, even as they try to present themselves as sheep.

Many commentators rightly point out that this instruction to observe their fruit amounts to an ethical test, and I readily admit that it at least includes this. Then, more than a few suggest that Jesus is referring to mainly or even solely an ethical test, but I think that the biblical evidence is against this.

Elsewhere, Jesus uses the metaphor of the tree when he responds to something that the Pharisees has falsely said about him:

"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:33-37; see also Luke 6:45)

Then, when he speaks about the relationship between what is in the heart and what comes out of it, he says:

"Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'" (Matthew 15:17-20)

In other words, out of an evil heart (a bad tree) comes *both* evil speech and behavior, not just evil behavior. This means that when we examine the "fruit" in one's life, we are to examine both his words and actions, both his creed and his conduct.

When Paul takes up the metaphor of wolves, referring to false prophets and teachers, he says, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare

the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:29-31). Paul uses one of the same metaphors in giving the same warning to the church as Jesus does in our passage, and here he says that the wolves are those who would "arise and *distort the truth.*" Spiritual wolves are *doctrinal* predators, and not just ethical ones. They are interested in destroying both the sound doctrines and lofty ethics that you have been taught from the Scripture by faithful and genuine ministers of God.

Since the beginning, Scripture has been warning God's people about false prophets. Without belittling the ethical test in the least, Scripture seems to teach the primacy of the doctrinal test. In fact, even if all indications seem to validate a person's ministry, failing the doctrinal test alone is sufficient to overturn all other signs and expose him as a false prophet:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

Even if a person announced a "miraculous sign or wonder" that indeed took place, he was exposed as a false prophet if he had "*preached rebellion*" (v. 5). But why would a person who preaches heresy seemingly be validated by other signs? It is because "the Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul."

The faith of God's elect remains sure and steadfast, even if some of them might stray for a time. In fact, throughout church history, heretical teachings had generated numerous occasions upon which the elect renewed their doctrinal commitments and refined their theological formulations. On the other hand, these heresies were almost always effective in drawing away false converts from the church. It is when the heresies are being preached from pulpits everywhere that the reprobates remain in the churches, because the church is then preaching the same thing that the world affirms.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section of the book, since Jesus' warning is placed within the context of the Sermon and immediately after his teaching on the narrow way, it

means that we must note its relationship to the Sermon in general, and to the teaching on the narrow way in particular.

Throughout the Sermon, Jesus has taught on the true demands of the law and the characteristics of his true followers. Then, immediately preceding his warning about the false prophets, he tells his hearers to enter through the narrow gate. Therefore, it seems that in our context, his warning pertains particularly to those who would contradict his teaching on the demands of the law and the narrowness of the way.

False prophets promote moral laxity and discourage spiritual vigilance. Jeremiah referred to those false prophets who preached peace, when there was no peace (Jeremiah 6:14), and to scribes who claimed to be wise by the law of the Lord, but in reality they "handled it falsely" (8:8). Ezekiel faced the same problem (Ezekiel 13:1-16).

The false prophets in our day include those who affirm and teach religious pluralism and moral relativism. They may teach that there is more than one way to God, or that the way to salvation is easy and wide. They may teach that at least some non-Christians will go to heaven, or even that God will not send anyone to hell at all. Many of them are Arminians, and teach that man is saved by his own choice instead of by God's sovereign decision alone. Some of them are heretics who teach that you may accept Christ as Savior but not as Lord, and still be regarded as a real Christian. Some of them regard abortion as a woman's right. Others think that homosexuals can be true Christians, or even be ordained ministers who lead the church. And some of them teach that you can be saved without then having to obey the law of God.

Paul writes that the Corinthians have been led astray from a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ" because "if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, *you put up with it easily enough*" (2 Corinthians 11:3-4). In Revelation, Jesus rebukes the church of Thyatira for tolerating a false prophetess, who among other things leads people into sexual immorality "by her teaching" (2:20). On the other hand, he commends those who "cannot tolerate wicked men," and who have exposed those who falsely claimed to be apostles (2:2).

In short, among other things, if a person tells you that you can be a Christian other than by faith in the biblical gospel, or if this faith does not necessarily produce obedience to God's law, then he is a false prophet. You must not accept or tolerate him, but you must expose and renounce him, and even expel him from your midst.

Many people will certainly resist this teaching, thinking that it is too harsh and unrelenting. But if you think this way, then you are confusing the sheepdog with the wolf. The sheepdog may look fierce at times, even growling and barking at you when you go astray, but precisely because of this, he is the shepherd's servant, and your friend and protector. On the other hand, a wolf who puts on sheep skin is still a wolf – he is vicious and cruel, and there is nothing he wants more than to deceive and then devour you.

TWO BUILDERS (Matthew 7:21-27)

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

After his exhortation to enter through the narrow way and his warning against false prophets who would teach you otherwise, Jesus now concludes the whole discussion and states the proper response to his Sermon.

Now, in his letter to the Romans, Paul writes as follows:

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 10:8-10)

From what Paul says, it seems that all that is needed to receive salvation is for one to believe and profess Jesus as Lord. However, Jesus says that not everyone who calls him Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, which in our context clearly refers to entering into life (Matthew 7:13-14), as opposed to destruction or damnation. But as we will immediately show below, there is no contradiction between Jesus and Paul.

Now, to say that "not everyone" who professes Christ will enter into life certainly does not mean that *no one* who professes Christ will enter into life. Rather, it just means that some but not all who profess Christ will receive salvation.

It is true that if you *both* believe and profess Jesus as Lord, then you will indeed receive salvation. However, it is possible that your profession is a lie – that is, you can disbelieve but make the profession anyway. If that is the case, then your profession is a lie; it is futile and ineffective, and does not result in salvation.

The way we know whether your profession is a lie is by whether you subsequently begin to obey God's commandments. As John writes, "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4).

In other words, if you say, "I have faith in Christ," then by this simple confession alone, you should have salvation – that is, if you *indeed* have faith in Christ. But as James writes, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26). Salvation is indeed by faith and not by works – that is not in question at all. Rather, the question is whether the faith that you claim to have is real.

Since faith is the result of God's sovereign work of regeneration in a person's heart, a person who has real faith is also one who has been changed by God. Therefore, real faith leads to real transformation and obedience in a person's life. If there is no transformation and no obedience, then there has never been real faith in this person in the first place. And since there has never been real faith in this person, this means that although he professes Christ, his profession is a lie, and he does not have salvation.

Thus Paul and Jesus are addressing different issues within the same subject. Paul is telling us the right way to salvation – believe and confess Jesus Christ; on the other hand, Jesus is emphasizing that our profession must proceed from a real faith. To put this in yet another way, Paul is saying that if you become a Christian, you will be saved; Jesus certainly agrees, but he warns that you can claim to be a Christian without really being a Christian. You become a Christian by faith, not by works; however, if you claim to be a Christian but do not exhibit works consistent with such a claim, then your claim is false, and you are not in fact a Christian. As 2 Timothy 2:19 says, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

Many people may consider certain qualities that they may have or certain works that they have done as irrefutable proofs that they are real Christians. In verse 22, the people invokes some of the most spectacular deeds that one may do in the name of Christ: prophesying in his name, driving out demons, and even performing "many miracles."

But Christ says that he will totally reject them, because these people are in fact "evildoers," or literally, "you who practice lawlessness" (NASB). Again, as Paul says, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Galatians 3:11). Justification by faith is not the issue here; rather, the point is that once a person has been justified by faith, he will no longer be a "lawless" person.

As we have read several times, God has said, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27). That is, you do not obey God's laws so that he will save you; rather, God saves you so that you will obey his laws. However, if you remain a lawless person, then this can only mean that God has never saved you, nor has he given you the desire and ability to obey his laws. Therefore, you are not a Christian.

Jesus is saying that charismatic powers and activities cannot take the place of true obedience. And he guarantees that a person who is antinomian (or lawless) in belief and practice will be rejected. Nowadays, our churches are overflowing with *antinomian charismatics*; they account for a large percentage of all those numbered as "Christians." Contrary to the dangerous perception that these people are Christians, Jesus is saying that *none* of the truly lawless ones, charismatic or not, are Christians – *none* of them are saved.⁷²

The lawless person is contrasted with "he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." To do the Father's will, then, is the opposite of lawlessness; rather, it consists of a true obedience to God's commandments, as rightly interpreted and applied by Christ throughout his Sermon.

"Therefore" (v. 24) – because only he who does the will of the Father will enter the kingdom and into life – "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (v. 24), but "everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand" (v. 26).

Christ has been saying that your eternal destiny hinges upon how you respond to his teaching. Therefore, if you are wise, then you will hear and obey his words, and construct your entire life upon his teaching. But if you build your life on anything other than his teaching, then you are a fool.

This is the real Jesus that heretics have been hiding from people. When Jesus preached, he told people to wholeheartedly follow him, saying things like, "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). It is true that God justifies us by grace through faith, but it is a faith that produces obedience, given to his elect by his sovereign will. Thus Jesus refuses to relax even the least of God's commandments. He demands your complete attention and obedience, and he calls you a fool if you do not hear and obey him.⁷³

Of course, most people are fools. They build their lives upon the teachings of scientists, philosophers, non-Christian religious leaders like Joseph Smith and Mohammed, the Pope, traditions and customs, or even their own private opinions and philosophies. But Jesus says that if you build your life on anything other than biblical teaching, then everything that you think you have attained and achieved, and all the good that you think you have done, will all count for nothing. When the storms of divine judgment come, all

⁷² Note that Jesus rejects them not for being charismatics, but for being antinomians. Nevertheless, antinomian charismatics will tend to find security in the charismatic activities in their lives, and Jesus is saying that this sense of security is without any warrant.

⁷³ In the light of the Sermon on the Mount, and in the light of its final exhortations, the urgent need today is for Christians to boldly preach, to the church and to the world, the whole scope of biblical revelation – *all of it*, without embarrassment and without compromise. Accordingly, Christ commands us to "make disciples of all nations...teaching them to *obey everything* I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). In other words, what we call the Great Commission involves proclaiming "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

that you have built will come crashing down on you. But by then, there will be no hope, no escape, and no second chance for you.