

The Unexpected Person and Character of Jesus Christ

David Gooding

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Contents

1	Perplexingly Unphilanthropic!	3
2	Scandalously Irreligious!	12
3	Disturbingly Moral!	22
4	Disconcertingly Joyful!	31
	About the Author	41

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PO Box 2216

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w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

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Perplexingly Unphilanthropic!

Let me first of all map out for you what I hope to do in this series of talks. My aim will be to re-examine the person and character of Jesus Christ as we find it in the historical documents. Put just baldly like that, perhaps it seems that I'm merely going to repeat what has been done a billion times before. Allow me an analogy to show why I think this is so desperately important.

Some years ago liberal theologians and agnostics were pressing hard their contention that the figure of Jesus Christ that we find in our gospels was not real, but simply an invention of the early Christians. At that time there appeared a brilliant book by a certain Otto Borchert.¹ Borchert's thesis was exceedingly simple but very effective. The figure of Jesus Christ in the four gospels cannot be the invention of the early church but is most certainly true to history, for this simple reason: no Jew would have invented the figure, even if they could, because the figure of Jesus Christ that we find in the gospels runs completely counter to all the main ideas that the Jews held of their coming messiah. They expected, for instance, someone who would come and lead the nation in a fierce warfare against their enemies, Rome, and bring the nation once more to political freedom. They found in Jesus Christ someone who was not willing to take the sword; and, far from disputing the reign of the Romans, he deliberately submitted to execution at their hands. That disgusted them.

They were expecting someone who would deal with their economic and social problems. Instead they found someone who seemed largely to neglect that and deal with their spiritual and moral problems. They expected somebody who would grapple with the nation and its national politics. Instead they found someone who was always insistent on the importance of the individual and the problems of the individual's heart. These facts led Borchert to develop his thesis that no Jew would have, even if he could have, invented the figure of Jesus Christ as we find it in the gospels. On similar grounds, Borchert pointed out how the Jesus Christ of the gospels could not have been the invention of a Greek or of a Roman.

My interest in these talks is simply this: it is a remarkable thing that the Jews found Jesus Christ so different from what they expected their Messiah to be, despite the fact that they had founded their ideas on the Old Testament. It therefore creates a problem immediately. How is it that men founded their idea of what a messiah would be on the Bible, but when he came they found him so utterly and shatteringly different? Was it because Jesus Christ was different from what the Bible said he was going to be? The answer is plainly, No. Though the Christians came eventually to see this, the New Testament does recall their utter amazement when they were taken by a risen Lord and referred back to the Old Testament. He pointed out to them

¹ Otto Borchert, *The Original Jesus*, London: The Lutterworth Press, 1933; repr. James Clark and Co Ltd, 2004.

passage after passage that described exactly who Jesus Christ was and what he would do—passages which, by some mysterious method, they had completely overlooked.

From all that I take a salutary lesson. If we would claim to know anything about any prominent figure in the world, past or present, most of us would probably imagine that we have a very clear notion of who Jesus Christ was and exactly what he stood for. But if the Jews could have been so mistaken, although they had founded their ideas, as they thought, on the Bible, shouldn't we be humble enough to consider whether we too might be mistaken? It might possibly be that the figure we have in our minds of Jesus Christ and what he stood for is compounded largely of ideas we culled from Sunday School and from a sermon here or there.

The general notions that float about in popular parlance, while they may be in part true, are not necessarily founded on any serious scrutiny of the historical records. It could be that we are as far away from what the real historical Jesus was, as were those early people in their expectations. At any rate, it can do no harm, and stands to do a considerable amount of good, if we take time from the business of life now and again to go back to our original sources and examine whether the picture of Jesus Christ we have in our minds is indeed true to the original facts.

The Popular View

I therefore propose to proceed by taking some of the popular conceptions that one finds in people's minds and to examine them one by one. To begin, I want to take that popular conception of Jesus Christ that portrays him as the ideal philanthropist and the social reformer. It is a very common idea, and one that you can build on apparently very sound foundations. Doesn't the Bible say that Jesus Christ went about doing good? Wasn't his aim to help his fellow men and women? Doesn't the Bible say that his particular form of doing good involved healing people of their physical complaints, bringing peace to tortured, neurotic minds, feeding the hungry of his day? What is that if it's not the picture of a sincere social reformer—a man moved with tremendous compassion for his fellow men and women, and giving himself selflessly in the cause of their greater comfort and enjoyment? And of course the Bible does say so.

Further, runs this viewpoint, consider his teaching. Didn't Jesus Christ lay it down as his main platform, his program, that people ought to learn that supremely simple lesson: how to love one another? Wasn't that the burden of his message; that they ought to forget all these ugly disputes that divide people—religious controversies, social and class distinctions, national prejudices? Didn't he teach us that we are all God's children? Wasn't the essence of his teaching just simplicity itself—if only we could wake up to the fact that we are all brothers in one family and God is our father, then the world would find its paradise?

Wasn't he somewhat impatient of theology and religiosity? Isn't it recorded that when the Pharisees tried to break down a lot of religious regulations to just keeping the Sabbath, he scorned the whole lot of it and said, 'God doesn't care about religion. All God cares about is that you are merciful to your employees, that you have compassion for the down and out, and that you will extend a brotherly welcome to a person of a different colour. God doesn't care

about your theology.' Therefore, according to this conception, Jesus Christ was a philanthropist, a social reformer and, above all, eminently practical in his good works. If that view were accepted there would follow some very far reaching implications indeed. Those who adhere to this view most strongly build their beliefs on this platform, and from there frequently fire their major cannons into the middle of the church.

Their complaint is that the church has utterly misread her Lord. They say that the church's business ought to be to continue its mission of feeding the hungry. The famine in so many places ought to be the church's major concern, together with the healing of the sick. This is true Christianity. The church's major concern ought to be in countering racism, seeking to knock down the barriers and bringing people together. They will say the church has done the very opposite. The church has got itself away into a corner, all mixed up with theological doctrines and disputes. Instead of being concerned with the social good of the nation at large, it has concentrated people's minds on the individual soul and their personal salvation. It has made a lot of introverts, people purely concerned about the salvation of their own little souls and winning a place in some fantastic heaven, instead of being really concerned about loving their fellow human beings, improving the slums and increasing goodwill among the nations. Instead of being concerned to feed a person's body, the church has opened their mouth and forced down their throat theological dogmas that do them no good whatsoever and, in the end, lead to bitter strife; even as the Christian church appears to be divided by theological controversy.

Very often as a final battery from this direction they will quote you that famous parable that our Lord spoke about the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46). How our Lord said that, when he returns again in power and great glory at the final judgment, he's going to gather the nations together and decide their destiny. Their destiny, according to the parable, is going to be determined simply by these criteria: Did you visit the sick in hospital? Were you a prison visitor? Did you clothe the naked? Did you feed the hungry? He shall say, 'Now you blessed, come to my heaven, because you visited me in prison, and clothed me when I was naked and fed me when I was hungry. Such good works deserve a heaven as a reward, come into my heaven.' He shall say to the others, 'Now you didn't do anything of the sort. You didn't engage in social work at all. You were only concerned about your little personal soul. Well I'm afraid you must go to the other place.' So they say, according to Christ, the only thing that matters is a person's social interest in the betterment of his fellow human beings. Such, I submit to you, is not altogether an exaggerated account of some people's modern ideas about what Jesus Christ stood for, and what his church should stand for still.

The Bible's View

Now let's come and examine this figure in the light of the historical records. Is this indeed what Jesus Christ stood for, and what he's saying still? We may have felt a little concern in the back of our minds, right from the very beginning perhaps, about the truth of this figure even though it is apparently supported by so much Scripture. The Bible does indeed say that Jesus Christ fed the poor and the hungry. The Bible says he did it twice. The Bible says he had miraculous powers and was able to produce bread to feed them; but then twice? Only twice?

Come, come, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, if you had any compassion at all for your contemporary men and women, many of whom were obliged to pull their belts very tight in the winter for food was never very plentiful, was twice all you could do?

If you put alongside that the number of sermons Christ preached, you'll find that his sermons are far more numerous than his feedings. There was that famous occasion when, all day long, he had been healing the sick. As a result the people poured around him in the evening, brought their sick to the door and clamoured to be healed of their diseases. The next morning when our Lord rose up early, he went out into the desert. Very soon the crowds were thronging around him again, bringing their sick and appealing to his compassion to do something for them in their misery. And then what?

The record says that he turned his back on them and said, 'Sorry, that's not my first business. I must go to the other cities.'

'What for? To heal their sick?'

'No indeed not,' he said. 'I must preach the gospel to the other cities, for that is why I came' (see Mark 1:29–38).

How does that square with our figure of someone who considered his prime job social reform or social alleviation?

But perhaps the most crucial bit of evidence in all this discussion is that famous occasion that followed the actual feeding of the multitude. Our Lord had fed five thousand people and they were so enamoured with this new figure that had arisen, somebody who could so easily solve their economic needs, that they came rushing forward in a great mob to make him king. And we read that when he perceived this he withdrew and deliberately refused to be made king of such people (see John 6:15).

Why so? Hear his own explanation to the crowds that sought him the next day clamouring to make him king and for him to feed them again. He said, 'You are seeking me for utterly the wrong reason. You seek me because you were filled with my loaves and fish, and that's all. But what I did yesterday in feeding the crowd was meant to be a sign and to convey a message: to lead you to consider the food that endures. You haven't the gumption or the willingness to see that the gift of physical food was merely meant to lead you to receive a far bigger gift. But if all your interest is merely what I can provide in the way of food to fill your stomachs, I'm not interested. So I would advise you, do not work for the food that perishes, but for food that endures to eternal life' (see John 6:26–27).

Let's consider for a moment what that sign was really saying. The people who came that day had a meal that was unique amongst all the meals they'd ever had. They found it immensely satisfying, for the hand that reached them the loaf and the fish was the hand of God incarnate. The wonder was not in the loaf or in the fish, nor was the glory of the thing in the miraculous mechanism that provided them. The whole glory of the operation was that God incarnate was handing people their daily bread. But they weren't interested in the hand that offered them the bread. They had eyes to see just bread and fish. There are people today who live like that. They eat their bread, and their cornflakes, and their beef steaks on the same principle. Glad enough to have them, but supremely indifferent as to whether there is any hand that provides them. They are worse than pigs, for a pig soon learns that there is a hand

that offers him his swill, and at the noise of the footfall that brings the pail, the pig will squeak out his recognition, even if thereafter he has no time for the farmer but only for the swill.

We live in a generation when people are content to take their mouthfuls constantly, supremely indifferent as to whether there is any hand giving them the gift. Indeed, some of them have invented a theory of physical science that there is no hand; that our daily bread and butter, and all that we count dear in life, is the result of one colossal accident, meaningless and senseless. In so doing, they rob life of its greatest glory and its profoundest satisfaction, for what is a gift without the giver? How different it is if, on the one hand, you buy yourself an expensive fountain pen for Christmas, and on the other, someone you love dearly gave you one for Christmas. Or allow me another analogy, what would you think of a girl who wore an engagement ring beautifully studded with diamonds and you saw her playing with it, as they do, letting light play upon the diamonds?

You said, 'Lovely ring isn't it? Beautiful indeed. May I ask who the young man is?'

'Young man? What do you mean?'

'The young man that is interested in you and gave you the ring.'

'Oh,' she said, 'I have no time for that kind of stuff at all.'

'Oh, but you said—it is an engagement ring, isn't it?'

'Well, yes, but I don't believe that sappy stuff. I know a young man did give me this ring, but I'm not interested in that. What I'm interested in is how beautiful the ring is.'

Such a thing is so ludicrous that we cannot imagine it happening. If it ever did happen, wouldn't it be grossly pathetic? Engagement rings have little significance unless there is someone who gave them, and in the giving, was proposing the closest of human relationships. Jesus Christ was saying that day, 'When I multiplied the loaves and fish it was more than merely an exhibition of divine mechanics. That would be utterly insignificant unless they were this: the hand of God gesturing his love to you. Asking you, through his gifts, to accept him, the giver; calling you into a deep and personal relationship with him. To take the gifts and have no interest in the giver is such a perversion.' That is such a tragedy that our Lord stoutly refused to have anything to do with it. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but if all you are interested in are fish and loaves then, goodbye. I'm not that kind of social reformer.'

We notice that the early apostles consistently adopt the same attitude. In Luke's history of the early church we find an illuminating incident when Peter and John were going up to the temple to pray. On the temple doorstep they found a man who had been lame from his mother's womb. The man was placed there to collect what alms the religious people were supposed to give him. It was thought to be a good place to put the man for on occasions when people go to church, are they not more than ordinarily sympathetic to their need to give something to the poor? Peter came up and had no money in his pocket to give and told the man so, much to his disappointment. But then he proceeded, in the name and power of Christ, to grant the man healing and deliverance from his inhibiting paralysis. The crowd of course came running: this was great news!

As they drew around Peter, excited at the possibilities, each person thinking which one of theirs relatives they would bring if this new miracle worker could help, Peter took the opportunity to make an exceedingly telling point. Says he, 'Fellow Israelites, this is a very strange thing. You come running around now because, in the name of Jesus, I have cured this

man of his physical illness. But wasn't it just a few days ago when you stood in this self-same city and shouted your heads off, and had no time for Jesus of Nazareth? You will take his social benefit but you are not interested in the salvation he offers. In fact, to put it bluntly, you murdered the very prince of life' (see Acts 3:1-15).

It's a curious thing. People will take the social benefits the church can give, but are not really interested in the prince of life. This is our Lord's contention. He reminded the devil at the temptation that man shall not live by bread alone. We fool ourselves if we think that we can keep ourselves going by filling our stomachs with bread, and filling our bodies with medicines. Life hangs by a stronger thread. 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matt 4:4). If we have no real personal interest in God, nor in his son who is the prince of life, we may fill our stomachs as full as we care with sardines, and inject our veins with all sorts of drugs, and we shall not permanently live. What was it then, that our Lord was saying that day?

Let us come back and think again about the conversation that is recorded. 'Do not work,' said our Lord, 'for food that perishes, but rather for food that endures to eternal life. Haven't you eyes to see that all material things, however enjoyable in themselves, are temporary? The flesh profits nothing. It is the Spirit that makes alive. What will you think if you see the Son of Man ascend back where he was before? This physical world is not the only world, nor is it the most important world. The more important world is the spiritual world, and what then if you've been interested merely in my fish and my loaves of bread; what will you do when I go back to that spiritual realm? What will you do when, in spite of fish and bread, the grave claims you? I urge you to abandon that narrow minded view of things that can only see life in terms of bread and fish, in those temporary human relations and business projects that surround us in this temporary world. Abandon that narrow view. It is so narrow that if you leave it like that, it will become perilous in the extreme. Instead, get hold of eternal life.'

Now it is a fact that many of us are extremely childish in our ideas when we think of eternal life. We hear the Bible talking about this thing called eternal life and we imagine it's something that happens to a person when they die. They get an extended period of existence in a lovely heaven up above somewhere. Most people vaguely hope, if they hope at all, that the gift of eternal life is something that God will give a person when they arrive at the gates of heaven, if they qualify to enter. Meanwhile, it doesn't do well to speculate too much on whether they're going to get it or not. They'd be better concerned about running this life now, and leave the speculation as to whether God will give them eternal life until they arrive at the pearly gates.

Such is the childish concept of heaven. Eternal life is something vastly different. It's not a thing we begin to think about when we're on our deathbeds and about to pass over to eternity. Eternal life is something that, if ever it's going to start, starts here in this life. Eternal life, you see, is not merely continued existence. It's a quality of life. It consists in that rich experience that is receiving Christ now, in this life and going through this life in intimate fellowship with God, seeing now beyond the mere material and external. Already, in this life, laying hold of the unseen and eternal. If a person fails to lay hold of eternal life in this life, it will be woefully too late to begin thinking of it in a life to come. Life in its fullness is a relationship.

Now you will begin to see, perhaps, why Christ was so insistent about this incident that arose when he fed the multitudes. They came merely for the physical satisfaction of eating his bread and his fish. To take it that far is good, but to take it no further is to miss that eternal life which is the chief purpose of mankind's creation. Why is it that we commonly show such disinclination to be interested in these spiritual and eternal things? Why is it that we find ourselves so very often caught up in our business, in our profession, able to unravel difficulties of every kind and yet, when it comes to these elementary things of real life, what it means to discover the giver of life and to enter into a personal relationship with him and have eternal life now, we're very often such veritable beginners and apprentices, and indeed non-starters. Christ, I think, had an answer to this.

When we come to think about God and about these intimate things such as receiving eternal life and being right with God, the fact is that we feel an acute embarrassment and a certain touch of anxiety. The reason is simply the old fashioned concept of sin. We have an instinctive feeling that to admit Jesus Christ into one's life, into this deep personal relationship, is going to mean a revolution. And for some of us, a radical revolution. I was talking not so very long ago to a professional man of this city. When it dawned upon him that Jesus Christ was not asking for his patronage or support, but was offering him his personal friendship and was asking to be allowed to come and invade his life, his reply was, 'But what about the boys?' We know what he meant. To do that was going to mean a revolution in his social life and social habits.

We have an instinctive feeling that our lives are not good enough for Jesus Christ to enter. Rather than be hypocrites and pretend we know anything about it, we shelve the matter to some distant eternity. The glory about what Christ has to say is that he has done something to remove the cause of this embarrassment. To remove the thing that makes it painful for us, and that makes us a little anxious to think about God and about receiving Christ. Said he, 'I bring you my flesh, I bring you my blood, that you might eat thereof, and so eating have eternal life.' What did he mean? He meant simply this: that he was going to shed his blood to give God an answer about our sin, to remove the wrath of God against sin. To clear our conscience and make it possible for us, though still sinners, to enter unafraid into this personal relationship with God. He said, 'You must drink my blood, you must eat my flesh.' It is not enough for a person to know that Jesus Christ came and died upon a cross. If this union is to be effected, then they must personally appropriate the gift that is offered. They must personally receive this living Lord Jesus Christ.

When a person does that, when they wake up for the first time to what Christ really did on that cross, they will understand that it is possible now to come in repentance, to walk into God's friendship and love, and to receive God as an inseparable friend. That they may receive, not merely in their mind but in their very heart, the living person and power of Jesus Christ, now, and find a new dimension in his friendship. Life takes on a meaning and a significance that life never had before. This is eternal life, begun here on earth.

So we are called to come and eat. In plain, practical terms we are called to be concerned about the need of all mankind. We are called to be concerned about daily things. But our supreme concern as individuals should be this: that we have understood this offer of eternal life that Christ has come to our world to make. That we should personally try to understand

what his death upon the cross has done for us, and that we should be willing with all our heart to receive him as our personal saviour and Lord, and come into the certain knowledge here and now that we are a redeemed man or woman and that we already have eternal life.

So that when the fish are gone, and the last crumb of bread has disappeared, we still have life that is life indeed; eternal life that will fit us for fellowship more profound with God in a day to come. You will say, 'Well that may be so, but I was never very strong at evangelical Christianity. I just do not know what it means to receive Christ. For the most part, I am content to abide by what you call the social side of Christianity. After all, our Lord said, didn't he, that his heaven is going to be for those that visited him in prison and did their social works?'

No, he didn't. Grant me just two more minutes to explode that unfounded theory. It is eminently perilous to interpret our Lord's parables outside their context. In that parable of sheep and goats (see Matt 25:31-46), he said first of all that those who will be saved at last were the people who had visited his brothers in prison. And who were his brothers? It is the notion that goes around that Christ Jesus taught that all people are brothers and sisters by virtue of the fact that all people are God's children. There is not one single line in the whole of the New Testament that says so. There have been, and are, people who wouldn't thank you to call them Christ's brothers or sisters. Certainly Caiaphas who ordered our Lord's execution wouldn't have been flattered if you'd called him one of Christ's brothers. The New Testament everywhere indicates that by the term 'Christ's brothers', it does not mean men or women in general. It means solely those who have received this gift of eternal life that he came to offer. They are his brothers, and sisters, and it is our attitude to them that will count at the last.

Consider the historical situation. Saul of Tarsus thought he ought to persecute the early Christians. He didn't like them: he didn't believe that Jesus was the messiah, and in particular he didn't like these early Christians who were forever harping on about the need to be saved. It offended his religious sense of decorum for people to get up on the street corner and tell their fellow men and women that they needed to be saved. He felt so indignant about it that he persecuted them everywhere. Then one day he was struck blind on the Damascus road and a voice from heaven said, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' He said, 'If I may ask, Lord, who are you?' He recognised that the voice was divine, but whoever could this voice be? It certainly wasn't that Jesus of Nazareth, was it? 'I am Jesus,' said the voice, 'whom you are persecuting. For in persecuting those people—Peter and Stephen and John and James, who stood on the street corner and in your synagogue and told you insistently that you needed to be saved—you are persecuting me. You didn't like to be told that you needed to be saved, did you?' (see Acts 9). Then the man had to decide what he was going to do. Fortunately he stopped his persecution of those Christians. Having discovered that Jesus Christ was God's son and had come to be his saviour, he took his stand alongside Christ and with all those who had found Christ as saviour.

That is what our Lord meant by the parable. Let me give it a modern twist. I was sitting in the snack bar in Queen's University the other day, engaged in very deep conversation about nothing much. I couldn't help my ears wandering further out to the common room where three or four of my colleagues were sitting. I heard a very interesting conversation: they were talking apparently about one of the college staff. 'He used to be one of the boys but I think he's seen the light or something. He goes around with a little badge on his lapel, saved, or

Jesus saves, or something.' I wish I'd been near enough to join in the conversation. Can you imagine with what tone of voice they were saying it? Puzzlement, faintly derisory? What on earth is this curious business of being saved that would make a man go around with a thing in his lapel, *Jesus saves*?

What would you have said if you had been near enough to those gentlemen? Would you have said, 'Well gentlemen, I must confess I don't know the man, so I don't know whether he's a genuine Christian or not. For my part, I don't think it's in the best taste to go around with a religious button in one's buttonhole. But if this means genuinely what he's trying to say, humble and uneducated man though he may be, that he has really found Jesus Christ as his personal saviour and has entered into this experience of receiving eternal life, and wants to tell his fellow men then, gentlemen, I must let you know I stand with him, for I too have had this experience of personal salvation. This is one of the Messiah's brothers. I want you to know I take my stand with him.'

Or would you have said, 'I don't know him, but such things are not for me.' Would you join their smirk? Those kinds of situations are with us in everyday life, but we ought to remember that the final judgment will run something like this. 'I was in Queen's snack bar, and you didn't stand with me.' They shall say to him, 'But Lord, whenever did we see you stand in Queen's snack bar?' And he shall say to them, 'Was there not a man who had *Jesus saves* on his coat collar? You know that my name, Jesus, means saviour, and you didn't stand with him, or with me. But you found this business of personal salvation irrelevant and unwanted, and an oddity to be derided.' Said our Lord himself, 'These will go away into eternal punishment' (Matt 25:46).

Scandalously Irreligious!

The Popular View

I suppose it is the easiest impression of all for us to gain of Jesus Christ of Nazareth that he must have been an exceedingly religious young man. After all, for the last two thousand years it has been in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth that we have built ourselves religious buildings all over the face of Europe, from the stately cathedral down to the corrugated iron mission hall. In his name, too, people in their thousands have engaged in religious exercises such as the singing of hymns and the praying of prayers. In his name we have put on the most sumptuous ceremonies, sacraments, baptisms and communion. His name, too, is the name we have invoked for many centuries to spread some kind of aura of decency over our birth, our marriage and our funeral. Even our calendar is punctuated with holidays that have their origin in religious festivals held in the name of Jesus Christ. It is, therefore, perhaps the easiest of all impressions to gain, for anyone who lives in this modern world, that Jesus Christ of Nazareth must have been exceedingly religious.

And of course in some part, some very great part, the impression is true when we examine this against the historical documents. The Jesus of history, so we are told, was a most regular attendee at the religious festivals of his nation, and often went up to Jerusalem city expressly for that purpose. Likewise, he seems to have been a frequent visitor at the regular weekly meeting of the synagogue, which was the ancient Jewish equivalent of going to church or chapel. Moreover in his own work he went out of his way, it seems, to honour the ceremonies that the national religion in Judea kept. For instance, we are told by one historian that when our Lord cured a certain leper he sent him along to the local priest, so that the priest might be able to examine him and perform all those ceremonial ablutions through which they were accustomed to put cleansed lepers, if they ever came across any in addition to those that our Lord sent them. On one occasion we read very strong language that our Lord, seeing the temple at Jerusalem desecrated, not only cleansed it but forbade anybody so much as to carry a vessel through it. Such was his tremendous respect for a building that had been set apart for the worship of God, a building which he called, 'my father's house' (John 2:16).

On the other hand, it would be very easy for these superficial facts to obscure the fact that the contemporaries of our Lord Jesus Christ found him shockingly irreligious. Many of them held that his teaching was so utterly perverse, that if they had allowed him to continue, he would have overthrown the whole fabric of their religion. There was more than just mad opposition in the charge that many of the religious leaders levelled against him that, far from being a genuinely religious man, he was of the devil. The animosity aroused was not simply to be explained by the fact that they were the leaders of one religion, and Jesus Christ had

come along and started another religion, although it is true that rival religions have been a curse in this world and a source of almost endless bitterness and strife.

The Bible's View

But if we examine the records carefully, it was not simply that the religious leaders of Judaism found in Christ a possible opponent of their own particular brand of religion and therefore were against him. It was rather that he gave them good grounds, at least superficially viewed, for thinking that he was a perverter of true religion in whatever form. They went so far as to say that he was driven by an unclean and unholy spirit. I want to examine the ground of those reactions on the part of his contemporaries so that I may follow up the thesis that I announced in the previous session, that we are examining the commonly held views about Jesus Christ against the background of the actual historical records.

There was of course that animosity that our Lord drew down upon himself by attacking the abuses of religion. I put it first because, in my estimation, it is the least of all of the causes. It is an uncomfortable thing, admittedly, if someone comes along and exposes the fact that we are indulging in abuses. Even if we agree that his criticism is justified, we find it a slur upon our own character that we've been content to tolerate these abuses. Our Lord gathered to himself some animosity simply by pointing out abuses that anybody in his right mind would agree with.

Let me remind you, for instance, of the parable he told of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). A lovely parable but it had a sting in its tail. Remember the phrases in which he couched the parable. The poor man set upon by thieves was lying half dead upon the road and, in his half-conscious moments, he hoped that some help would come. Along the road came a priest and then a Levite. It could easily have been a farmer or a tax-collector. But the author of the parable chose the terms deliberately. It was a priest and a Levite that came by, two exceedingly religious men, professionally religious, and, according to Jesus Christ, they passed by on the other side. The by-standers didn't fail to get the point of the story.

Looking at it dispassionately, we must agree that it is a danger into which religious people can fall if they are not careful. They think that the singing of some hymns, the hearing of a few sermons and the attendance in a house of worship are the performance of all that God requires of us. It is so easy to go and hear a sermon on moral values and imagine that just by listening we have fulfilled all our duties in regard to that aspect.. In some parts of the world it has been tragically easy for religion eventually to divorce itself completely from moral values. I speak not merely of Christian religion, but of all sorts of religion. So that religion becomes a sort of paying of rates and taxes to a divine proprietor for the building in which we live. Our Lord very directly exposed that possibility. He was not saying that the priest and Levite were doing wrong things by engaging in their religious exercises; far from it. But he reminded all who do so, that that by itself is not the discharge of their duty towards God and people, and must on no account be substituted for the fulfilling of our moral duty.

And then there was the notorious occasion when our Lord cleansed the temple, an occasion that caused more than the lifting of an eyebrow or two among the temple authorities (Matt 21:12–13). What would you say to somebody who entered St Paul's Cathedral and

proceeded to turn out the selling of post cards and all the rest of the things that are for sale there? Our Lord was disgusted at the use of religion as a means of making money. I need say no more: I'm sure that all of us would agree that this is a perversion of religion. Religious societies of course must have some money to go about their tasks. Our Lord had no objection to the treasury in the temple where freewill offerings were put. What he did object to most strongly was the exploitation of religion as a means of making money. If, as Christians, we are reminded by Muslims and Hindus that the Christian church in Europe has in the course of centuries collected so much treasure and money that it is one of the most highly powered financiers in Europe, do we not feel the embarrassment of the observation and hasten to excuse ourselves? Whilst the temple authorities may have been angry on the spur of the moment, I would submit to you that this kind of attitude to religion must have approved itself in the minds even of those who were most deeply involved in his rebuke.

Then there were his observations on religious ceremonies and customs. On several occasions the historians tell us our Lord was present on the Sabbath day in a synagogue when there was somebody in the congregation who desperately needed to be healed of some physical or mental infirmity. This was quite an issue in those days because these particular people felt that in the name of God and religion no work ought to be done on the Sabbath. It caused a very bitter storm when our Lord scorned their ideas completely and said, 'The Sabbath was made for mankind, and therefore anything that is humanitarian may be, and should be, done upon the Sabbath day.' A set of regulations that, instead of helping people, conveying to them that God is a God of love who cares for them, had been twisted to do the very reverse and represent God as a hard taskmaster who would bind burdens on people's back and make their lives a misery. These things were such perversions of God's attitude to people that our Lord openly and vigorously exposed them.

Perhaps his disgust was aroused most of all against those silly regulations with which religion has sometimes burdened itself. It is Mark that tells us that our Lord and his disciples were caught eating a meal without having first washed their hands, which offended some of the religionists of his day. They held it a very important rite and ceremony that before you ate your food you should wash your hands. There is no way you'll find that in the Old Testament. It was something that religion had invented for itself. With utter unconcern whether people were offended or otherwise, Christ ridiculed the whole thing. 'Wash your hands indeed,' he said, 'what use is that?' (We leave aside the germicidal properties of soap: we're thinking now in religious contexts!) Not only is it useless, says our Lord, or do anything for a person, its danger is that it clouds their vision and stops them from seeing that there are far more important things they need to attend to. The things that really defile a person, said our Lord, are the things that come out from their heart—lust, evil thoughts, hate, jealousy, narrowness of mind (see Mark 7:1–23). Taking soap and water to them is so absurd as to be trifling. Any external ceremony that makes a person feel more religiously comfortable, when all the time their conscience has not been touched as to their need for personal repentance, are not only useless but dangerous. I imagine that our Lord, were he here, would remind us of the same danger of any religious ceremony that makes a person feel that they are in better standing with God, if it hasn't meant that they have been called upon to examine their heart and their conscience, to confess their sin and get right with God.

But these four instances that I have mentioned I would count as the least of the reasons why our Lord was regarded an irreligious man in his day, for we can all see the rightness of his objections. What he was attacking was not religion but the abuses to which religion is sometimes put. We come to a deeper level, more subtle, more penetrating, when we observe those comments that our Lord made in the parables he told: that religion is not enough even in the realm where many consider it to be altogether sufficient.

It is obvious to us all that religion by itself is not enough if you are thinking of your duty to your fellow man or woman. It is not enough to sing hymns with the priest and the Levite and attend church. You must cross the road and get down and help to lift that fallen person and minister to their physical as well as their spiritual needs. But it is an altogether more serious charge that religion is not enough even when we come to our relationship with God. We commonly use religious ceremonies as a means of cultivating what we might call our personal relationship with God. Therefore to have our Lord suggesting that religion—in the sense of all those ceremonies, symbols and festivals which people have invented to make their way into personal experience with God—are totally inadequate, is a serious matter.

John records in his gospel one illustration to the point. The Jews had been celebrating one of their most colourful religious festivals of the whole year, the Feast of Tabernacles. It was a beautiful ceremony which lasted for some days. It would evoke the deepest feelings in anybody's breast. What is more, lest you should misunderstand me, the large portion of this festival was one which God himself had ordained. Yet we are told that on the last great day of this festival, just as it had reached its climax, a voice was heard, raised rather loud in the temple court amidst the crowd, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink' (John 7:37).

Caiaphas didn't miss its implications. There was, we are told, a very hurried meeting of the Sanhedrin after that. I would love to have been able to eavesdrop on that committee meeting, although the language across the floor was perhaps not always edifying. Caiaphas and the chief priests generally were absolutely livid. They'd put on the show of the year, and to have one of these trumped up street preachers daring to interrupt it, in full view and hearing of the congregation just at that critical moment, was totally unacceptable. And to suggest that the ceremonies that had been offered were not everything a person could possibly wish for, they counted as a stunning insult. So Caiaphas and company pressed the Sanhedrin to start seeking the man's blood.

You can understand them. How would you like it if a street preacher, at the climax of the mass, got up and talked in such terms? 'If any man thirsts,' he said, deliberately implying that that whole week's round of religious ceremonies could leave many of the people unsatisfied. There was, our Lord was saying, a better way to God, a nearer approach than symbol and ceremony. If that was so, then our Lord would not hesitate in telling people so. He was not saying that symbol and ceremony were wrong: he believed both had been appointed by God. But he was saying that it is possible for a person to stop at the external ceremony, to see no further than the symbol, and miss those realities of which the symbol speaks. He was saying moreover that it is possible for someone to imagine that the performance of the ceremony is all there is. In either case, people would inevitably be left unfilled and unsatisfied. Only a person to person relationship can possibly satisfy.

I imagine that if our Lord were here at this present time, he would constantly remind us of the same thing. He would point to our Christian ceremonies of baptism and the communion. He would not say these things are wrong any more than he said the Jewish ceremonies were wrong: both were, and are, God given. But what he would say, and in as loud a voice as originally he said it in the temple, would be that it is a tremendous pity to be merely content with the symbol and the ceremony and not get beyond them to the spiritual reality of which they speak. He would warn us of the danger of imagining that these Christian ceremonies and symbols have some virtue in and of themselves, so that having gone through them you are somehow better. We must guard against that. Our Lord expressed it in this way: that when the master of the house rises up and shuts the door, there would be some standing outside who had expected to be inside. Against all their entreaties they are permanently excluded because they did not seek God in the right way and were content with things that were short of reality and only symbols. 'Have we not eaten and drunk in your presence Lord, and have you not taught in our streets?' This may well be a commentary on our religious symbolism.

What a warning it is, lest we take religious symbols and fail to come to the reality of which they were meant to point. Our Lord's reply to those people was, 'Depart from me, I never knew you.' Not to be understood as meaning, 'I didn't know you existed,' for our Lord in his omniscience knows everybody who exists. But to be understood in the deeper meaning of that term, 'I never knew you. I never had deep and intimate and personal relations with you.' And only deep and personal relations between a soul and that soul's saviour are sufficient to open the door of heaven and God's paradise.

And then, if I might continue in that same strain for a moment, you'll remember how our Lord on occasions accused religion of getting its proportions so terribly wrong. There were those, for instance, who tithed dill and cumin. Our Lord didn't complain. 'These things you ought to have done,' he said, 'according to your ancient religious code' (Matt 23:23). But in doing those small things they overlooked the mercy of God, and the justice of God—a sad lack of proportion in their religious exercise. And then we remember that famous conversation that our Lord had with the Samaritan woman sitting on a well in a village called Sychar (see John 4).

John records that incident, so vividly and so true to life that I beg to remind you of it in detail. Our Lord came and sat on the well. He was thirsty as he'd been walking in the sun in the middle of the day. When this woman came to draw from the well, he asked her for a cup of water—an ordinary social act that one might expect from one's fellow human being. He didn't get the water. The woman nearly fell over with astonishment that he, being a Jew, should ask for a drink from her, a Samaritan. Religion had carved such a deep chasm between those two communities. Palestine isn't a very big land. It's even smaller if you take out from it the northern part of Galilee, and just leave yourself Judea and Samaria. The number of people living in it was not overly large, and yet in that far off day that tiny land was divided to its very roots over a religious quarrel that had become so bitter that no Samaritan would ever expect a Jew to ask them for a drink of water. And had a Jew been accosted by a Samaritan he might have been so rude as to spit in his face. What was it all about? Well, it was a dispute about where people ought to worship and which the right religion to follow was.

Curiously enough, these two different sects based all their beliefs on the same Bible. It is amazing how people can be based on the same Bible and come to such different conclusions. The Samaritans said they based everything on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. The Jews claimed the very same. They claimed to be worshipping the same God but the bitterness was absolutely incredible. It turned on the question of where you ought to worship—in that place or this place. Now there were good historical reasons why people ought to have worshipped in Jerusalem and our Lord did not overlook them. He pointed out to the Samaritan woman that the Old Testament had commanded them to worship in Jerusalem. God had laid down that rule in the kindness of his heart, to spare those primitive people from being led away into idolatry. But for the Jews, who technically were in the right, to allow this thing to blow up into such great proportions until it became like a vast mountain in people's minds, was tragic and indeed blameworthy.

When our Lord began to talk to that woman about the basic issues of true religion, we observe at once how this unhappy controversy completely filled her mind and obscured from her what our Lord was trying to say. Our Lord said, 'If you knew who I was, and if you knew the gift that God is waiting to give people, you would have asked me and I would have given you this living water.' Following further conversation the woman replies, 'You're a Jew and you say that Jerusalem is where people ought to worship. Now for my part, I was brought up a Samaritan, and our fathers have always worshipped at this mountain.' The unspoken implication is: my religion is as good as yours anyway, and I'm not having you come here trying to foist your religion upon me; my denomination is as good as yours.

What a modern ring it has. And how we too stand condemned for allowing it to spread in the minds of people that the all important thing about religion is in which church you worship. Important as may be the historical reasons behind all these vexed questions, we do ourselves an injury if we allow this to get out of proportion. The main thing about religion is certainly not your denomination and where you worship, and who is right and who is wrong. The main thing that our Lord tells us is: Have you received this gift that God is willing to give? 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water' (v. 10).

The main thing about my worship is not where I worship but how. 'God is spirit,' said our Lord. It stands to reason that true worship is not a matter of geography, nor the shape of your building, nor the order of your service. God is spirit. They that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. But how will a person do that unless they have first received God's Holy Spirit and know within themselves that God has given them a gift that comes bubbling up like a healthy brook. They have come to know God personally and now spontaneously love him, want to talk to him and tell him how much his salvation means to them. If this is lacking, what an empty farce it is. What a dangerous farce it is, to hold to these religious debates about the rightness or wrongness of this or that particular denomination.

I want to come now to what in my estimation was the most shocking thing of all that Jesus Christ said. Not shocking perhaps in our ears, but shocking in the ears of his contemporaries. For none of the things so far mentioned would have caused the religious leaders of his day to accuse Christ of blasphemy. But the things that I'm now going to mention, they immediately and without hesitation denounced as straightforward blasphemy. I refer to our Lord's

revolutionary teaching that salvation and acceptance from God does not depend upon a person's good works or their model behaviour. It does not depend on their striving, and even less so on their religious observances. But salvation and acceptance from God depends solely on their repentance and faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Salvation is therefore a gift, not to be striven after with religious discipline, but to be received as a bankrupt person receives their discharge and, from a kindly friend, a new lot of capital to set up in business again. Because it is a gift, and because it does not depend upon our strivings or our merit, a person may not only receive this gift in this life, but they may be utterly sure that they have the gift. It was this kind of teaching that secured for our Lord the reputation of being a blasphemer. I will quote some of the incidents. You will gather from them, though they are few from what might be quoted, how extensively our Lord taught this, what importance he attached to it and what storms of protest it aroused.

First of all there were those people that did not like the idea of eleventh hour conversions — rogues and vagabonds and worse coming and staging some kind of what they called repentance and faith, and being accepted and told they were saved. Our Lord answered them in the parable that we have come to call the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a parable in which we commonly dwell upon the large heartedness of the father who forgave the son when he came home. And in so doing, we do well. But the parable, as with all of our Lord's parables, has a sting in its tale. The figure we should notice is not the father, nor the prodigal son, but the elder brother whose reactions fill the last verses of the parable.

When he came home and heard all the music and dancing, he inquired what it meant. He was told that his younger brother, that dissolute scoundrel of a chap, had come home and his father had received him. At this the elder brother turned away in perfect disgust. His father came out and pleaded with him, but he refused to have anything to do with it. Let's not be hasty to condemn him. Could we not think of some reasons why he would have taken that attitude? I think I could put some in his mouth. 'I call it putting a premium upon sin and debauchery; it is encouraging immorality and lax living. Here I am and I've served you these many years and get nothing and yet a veritable vagabond, who's gone off with harlots and lived it up, now comes back and stages some kind of repentance or conversion or something and you've received him and made a tremendous fuss! Well I'm not interested. I don't believe in that kind of conversion. I believe in a person honestly pegging away at their religion and being sound in their citizenship.' He was very distrustful of these people who, when they find sin doesn't pay, attend some conversion meetings and come back. So his attitude was, 'Let's all go together into the judgment hall and take what is our due. Let the reprobate get what he deserves. But the honest religious man that has denied himself these ungodly pleasures and tried to discipline his life will be recognised for the meritorious fellow he is.'

Have we never heard anything similar in modern parlance? What was the fatal flaw in that elder brother's attitude? It showed that his religion was not the true type, much as it might commend itself to those of us who rank respectability very high. Says he to his father, 'Father I have served you these many years and I've got nothing for it.' That must have cut his father to the very heart. Is that why the elder brother served him? He was serving all these years for what he could get out of it? He was indeed, and that's why he objected when the other chap had gone off and had a jolly good time, and could come back and be accepted without

deserving it. 'It's totally unfair,' he says, 'I've been working the hardest I could, but I get nothing and he gets everything.'

This was an exceedingly illuminating observation of our Lord. So easily does religion come to tell us that we are to be good, so that we shall merit God's heaven. That is a sad perversion of religion. God is not in business; God's heaven isn't for sale and his love isn't to be merited. What would you think of a mother who sold her love to her children for the coin of their good behaviour? God is not intending to fill his heaven with people that are good for what they get out of it. This is altogether the wrong reason for being good, attending to my religious devotions and striving after moral perfection. God wants people who are good for the sake of being good, who try to please him because they want to please him, though they expect to get nothing out of it. It must be that if God is going to receive us, he will not receive us on the grounds of our religious merit, nor upon the grounds of our moral stripe. He will receive us one and all solely on the ground that he loves us, when none of us deserves to be loved; and is prepared to forgive us though none of us can possibly deserve to be forgiven. He will spread the table of his heavenly welcome, paid for, not by our efforts, but by the sufferings of his son. That alone can pay God and atone for human sin. Whether elder brother or younger vagabond, if in the end we are to be saved, we must come, not on the ground of our religious strivings, but as bankrupts to receive a free salvation.

Another parable that our Lord told carried the matter much deeper and aroused a good deal more indignation — that famous parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector who went up into the temple to pray (Luke 18:9–14). Their prayers proceeded in this kind of language. From the Pharisee, 'God I thank you that I'm better than everybody else. Look at my religious observance, tithing and fasting, and the way I keep at it. I thank you that I'm better than that other fellow.' And the tax collector's prayer, so disgusted with himself that he would not so much as dare to lift his eyes to heaven, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' This poked the wound even more deeply. The parable of the Prodigal Son was aimed to tell us that prodigals can indeed rightly be welcomed as long as they repent; and when they are welcomed home God will grant them his full salvation freely. But this parable seemed to go further and say that not only is the repentant rascal saved, but the good religious person is not saved and is altogether rejected. That seemed to turn the religious world utterly on its head.

A magnanimous religious person might say, 'Well, so long as I feel pretty sure that my performance will gain me salvation in the end, I don't mind if God is merciful on the other chap who didn't do so well.' But to be told that the other chap who didn't do so well, because he trusts Christ, will be saved; and the religious man who appeared to do exceedingly well will be rejected, seems ludicrously blasphemous and calculated to undermine all moral effort. The Pharisees and religionists in general hardened in their enmity to this novel preacher. And yet, do not our consciences approve his teaching as right? He was not denouncing moral effort but if it comes to a question of comparisons, such as that Pharisee insisting, 'Lord I'm better than that other man,' let a moment's reflection teach us common sense. If I stand in my laziness upon the earth but my friend, with much labour, climbs to the top of Mount Everest and you compare him with me, behold how far higher than me he is. But then, if you compare the both of us with the man in the moon, the distance by which he is higher shrinks the comparison to insignificance; so insignificant that it isn't worth mentioning.

Compare people among themselves, and this person is better than the other person. Compare them before God, and his holiness towers so high above both that the difference between the two people is utterly insignificant. No person who has ever caught sight of the holiness of God will ever again murmur about their superiority to anyone else. Both are bankrupt, both have mud on their feet; both are unfit for God's presence and his holiness.

Then you'll see another fatal flaw. Says our Lord, 'That Pharisee trusted in himself that he was righteous.' That is the very opposite of true religion. True religion is someone coming into a relationship with a person whereby their faith is altogether away from themselves and their trust is in another. The person whose religion has led them to trust in themselves has severed that relationship where it is most vital. It is incipient idolatry. It is a person seeking to come before God on their own merit instead of admitting that anything good they have comes only from God. People who have gone through life trusting in themselves have never come to a true relationship with Jesus Christ and have gone off into eternity, isolated little islands of personality, untouched by the life giving saviour.

I come to my last point, where you'll see that our Lord commented that the tax collector went down to his house justified. You say, 'It cannot really mean that the man knew he was justified, that he was right with God? Surely a person cannot be certain until the final day?' Here we reach perhaps the most revolutionary of our Lord's teachings. He would have told you that a person could know, and indeed must know. Did he not say to the paralysed man, 'Your sins are forgiven'? 'Blasphemy,' retorted the scribes and theologians, 'nobody can know that.' But indeed they can. You may say that the whole point of religion is surely that we are kept on our toes because we cannot anticipate the final judgment. But that is precisely what our Lord taught: that a person can know. They can know because our Lord informed his startled contemporaries that, 'I, Jesus of Nazareth am to be the judge at the final judgment. Hearing my verdict now, you may be certain my verdict then will be the same.' And in memorable words, he informed us how we may anticipate that final judgment and be certain here on earth what the judge will say at the last: 'A person who listens to my word and puts their faith in him that sent me has, here and now, eternal life, and shall never come into judgment, but has already passed over out of that state of death into which a person is born physically, into the possession of eternal life that puts them right with God. They know it in this present life. How can it be? Because I am the judge,' said our Lord, 'and the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to me' (see John 5:22-24).

The reaction was that some took up stones to stone him. Others believed and were saved. At least we can say this of those who would have stoned him, they saw the point. They now saw that there was something as different as heaven is from earth, between the performance of religious ceremony and this experience of being received by Christ and receiving Christ. Receiving the gift of his Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins; the certainty here in this life that we are right with God and that we shall never be lost. You may say, like those who would have stoned Jesus Christ, that his ideas were nonsensical and blasphemous. But if you say that, you must abandon all profession of being a Christian. You may say it's impossible because if a person knew they were saved, it would lead to the most terrible and blameworthy laxity of life. Not so. I leave with you the incident which took place in Simon's house when a

woman off the streets came in and sobbed her way to repentance and faith at the saviour's feet. The religious people, as usual, objected to such conversions.

They said, 'A little bit of superficial emotionalism, but there are nasty undertones of sex about this somewhere, that this woman should be handling this man's feet. What we like is nice conservative religion. You'll soon see what will happen to this woman. This Nazarene telling her that her sins are forgiven, what utter rot. She'll go back to her own trade very soon, you'll see.' Said our Lord to Simon, 'Simon, if there were two men that owed money, one a large sum and the other a considerable sum, and they had nothing with which to repay the debt and their creditor forgave them, what do you think would be their reaction? Would they love him in gratitude?'

'I suppose so,' said Simon.

'Which would love him the more?'

'The man who'd been forgiven most,' said Simon.

'Then I ask you, on your own terms, to look at this woman. What has happened to her? Why is there this devotion, this love to me? Simon, this is evidence that this woman has been forgiven.'

Our Lord and his apostles tell us that this is how true Christianity works. When people have been freely forgiven, know they have eternal life and shall never come into judgment because Jesus Christ suffered and paid the debt for their sins when he died upon a cross, there springs up such a well of gratitude in them that makes them want, in spite of all their fumbling failures, to please that saviour. This is the mainspring of a life of developing holiness. 'But Simon,' said our Lord, 'looking at your attitude to me, your ice-cold formality and all the rigmarole of your religious observances, is there any evidence in your life that you are forgiven? I've not yet noticed very many sparks of that affection and devotion towards God and his Son that are the evidence of a heart that has entered into the joy and gladness of personal contact with Jesus Christ.'

Disturbingly Moral!

It is something much more than a popular conception of our Lord that he told us, as no one else has told us, that God is a God of love. It's a conception solidly based on the historical records. It is not a conception that I wish to find fault with in any way whatsoever. Christ did tell us that God is a God of love. He put such emphasis on it that we might, without any exaggeration, describe him and his teaching on God's love as unique. In this session, I wish to deal rather with the deductions that are popularly and currently made from that teaching of our Lord, that God is love. I want to divide them into two main groups and give one example of each. There are the deductions that I would describe as 'too little,' and there are those I would describe as 'too much.'

The Popular View

As the notorious example of the former, a deduction which is utterly inadequate and too little, I would cite the commonly held opinion that it is impossible for anyone to be absolutely sure in this life that they have been permanently and finally accepted by God. It is an opinion commonly held, in spite of the fact that the Bible assures us that God has so loved this world that whoever believes in Christ shall not perish (John 3:16). Yet people will commonly assert that it is impossible for anyone to be certain that God has permanently accepted them and will never cast them out. It is impossible to say definitely that you are saved.

It's an odd sort of a belief. It marches very awkwardly with the idea that God is love. For if we could descend to the level of human love for a moment, none of us would approve in our hearts of a mother who brought her children up in uncertainty, never allowing them to feel they were secure in her affections; always making her acceptance of them depend on their behaviour, and leaving them in doubt through all their formative years as to whether, finally, she would accept them at all. There are such kinds of mothers, unfortunately, in the world — people with curious neurotic perfectionist ideas on the bringing up of infants. But all our hearts, surely, would maintain that it is a mother's prime function to assure her children that she does accept them. And though she is exceedingly keen on their behaviour and their moral development, nevertheless her acceptance of them and her love for them is not dependant on their behaviour.

Yet when we come to God who is infinite in love, and when we come to a situation where the issues are infinitely more important than a mother's acceptance of her child, it is commonly held — in fact it is preached in some quarters in the name of Christianity — that it is

altogether impossible and wrong for a person to believe they can be certain of their salvation here and now. It all must be left in suspense, so they say.

If that stands at the extreme of what I would call 'too little,' we have on the other hand a widely held popular conception that I would call 'too much' deduction from the love of God. It runs that God is such a God of love that all people, no matter how they have lived, no matter whether they have cared in this life to have anything to do with God, whether they have received his Son and confessed him as Lord or whether they have gone their own merry careless way, all at last will turn up in God's heaven. On the face of it, you might suspect that that doctrine is childish. Has God some kind of a fairy mother's wand? Irrespective of the way people die at the end, he waves it over them and, hey presto, they are good and acceptable in his sight, whereas they weren't acceptable on earth? Then I would ask, 'Why doesn't God use the wand a bit more liberally while people are in this life?' Is it that God has some special vision reserved for people who, in this life, have obstinately refused to accept him or his Son? That he has some kind of vision that he will apply when they reach the other side that will, in a trice, convert them?

Then I suggest, if he is a God of love, that he should disclose the vision now for many quite obviously are in sore need of it. And if it is that a thousand or more years of suffering in some kind of purgatory would make a person fit for God after they have finished this life, well, in the name of divine love, let the purgatory begin here and now. Let God make a hell of this life, that he might bring people at last to his heaven in the next. It's a childish idea. There is no such magic wand and there is no such extra vision; there is nothing on the other side that will make a person a little bit different. But is God not a God of love? And if God is a God of love, how can it be possible that he would ever punish a person and permanently reject them? It is a false deduction that would turn the love of God to a mere careless sentiment.

The extreme absurdity is reached, of course, in people who try to hold both of those views together. On the one hand that God will eventually bring everybody, somehow, to his heaven irrespective of how they have lived on earth, because he is a God of love; and yet at the same time the proposition that no one here on earth can be sure that they will be saved. You will perceive at once the contradiction between the two. If you can't be sure you're saved, then you can't be sure in spite of God's love. If everybody is going to be saved in the end, then you can be sure. The contradiction is not in the teaching of Christ. When we go back to what he himself taught, it did at least make sense. The contradictions have come about because, in what Christ taught about the love of God, there were certain profoundly disturbing elements. And being what we are, we find the disturbing elements somewhat distasteful and we prefer to forget them or water them down. But those elements were an integral part of what Christ taught. If you omit them you arrive at an account of his teaching that is contradictory and nonsensical. We must, therefore, if we have the courage, go back and face the records again, and ask ourselves exactly what Christ did teach about God, about his love, and about his holiness.

The Bible's View

I would like to quote in this connection certain passages and excerpts from our Lord's teaching and in particular his teaching on morality. I use that term in the widest possible sense, not in the limited sense of sexual morality, but the whole array of human behaviour. And I would like to point out how his most famous sermons, the Sermon on the Mount for instance, are geared towards demonstrating to his hearers how lamentably inadequate people's ideas of morality were. It is very interesting to notice the context in which Christ preached these things. When he preached the sermons on morality, he wasn't particularly addressing his remarks to the sinners amongst them. He wasn't particularly addressing himself to the prostitutes on the street, or the drunkards, informing them that prostitution was a sin which they hadn't known before, and that drunkenness was to be altogether regretted. In fact, you will very rarely find our Lord, at least as recorded in the historical documents, preaching sermons on morality to those people who are blatantly immoral in our modern sense, for the simple reason that most of them knew they were sinners and found it easy to recognise the rightness of God's call on them to repent.

The people that needed this kind of treatment were, strangely enough, the more religious amongst them. The people who were so decent in their behaviours that in their heart of hearts they genuinely thought they were in the running to gain acceptance with God. And although they couldn't be sure here and now that they were definitely saved, yet they were persuaded in their hearts that, with a few more years and a little more endeavour, they would pull themselves over the pass mark and have good hopes at last of being accepted by God on the ground of their moral striving. It was to them that our Lord came out with this powerful statement, 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:20).

What did he mean? We must be very careful here. Some scribes and Pharisees were given to a little unconscious hypocrisy—like saying prayers but doing very little good. Our Lord wasn't getting at that. He said, 'You believe it is wrong to murder and you feel within your heart of hearts that you haven't gone to the extreme of sin because you've never plunged a dagger into anybody's heart or mixed a little cyanide with anybody's drink. Therefore the impression seems to grow on you that given a little more opportunity you will qualify for a place in God's heaven.'

That is lamentably inadequate. There are more ways than one of killing someone. If you happen to be a powerful businessman and you gang up with another powerful businessman, you can put your prices down to the lowest level so as to drive a third businessman out of business. You can do it if you want to, and you don't care whether it brings him to a nervous breakdown and into a psychiatric hospital, for you will never be charged with murder in the courts. Even that isn't really getting at the heart of what our Lord is saying. He's saying this, 'Whoever is angry with his brother—angry in the sense of uncontrolled passion, anger that springs from selfishness—and in a moment of temper speaks irresponsible words against his brother, the man is in danger of hell fire' (Matt 5:22).

It's not the outward act that is all important, although of course it is better that you don't kill a person whatever you feel. It's a matter of the heart. Those evil, sinister actions that all of us find springing up in our hearts. We may have disciplined ourselves not to let them translate

themselves into actual deeds, but the fact that they are there at all, says Christ, renders a person in danger of hell fire. Likewise, you think you're qualifying for God's acceptance because you've never actually committed adultery, and that's a good thing. But let not that deceive a person into thinking that all is well, for anyone that has let their mind play on a another who is married, or for a married person who has let their mind play on a another who isn't married, God counts it just as evil. The outward act is wrong, but no less serious is the inner act. It is not what we do, but what we are. It is not merely our external acts but our heart that is so desperately wrong.

Not only is Christ speaking like this when it comes to the negative side of morality — 'You shall not' — but likewise he brings things down to the spiritual, to the matter of our hearts, when he announces what positive morality is: 'You've heard people say that you should love your neighbour and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemy, positively love him, pray for him, bless him, do good to him' (Matt 5:43–44). That's not a deluxe kind of Christianity, a sort of super standard, an additional course for the exceptional saints. This is the minimum below which, if a person falls, they have no chance of acceptance with God on the grounds of having performed God's moral law. When a lawyer asked the Lord on one occasion what was the greatest of all the commandments, the answer didn't come in the form of a list of do's and don'ts. Instead Jesus replied, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment' (Matt 22:37–38).

If we fail to love the Lord God with all our minds, that is to break the greatest commandment. Breaking the greatest of the commandments is by definition the greatest sin. We do need to get our perspectives right, for if this is God's demand, then is it not obvious that all of us without exception come short? But at this point we must be very careful once more, lest we take the wrong turn. When our Lord said, 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,' he wasn't criticising their standards so that he would now map out his own standards as a way of salvation. He wasn't saying they have not done enough, so if you wish to enter God's kingdom you must do a little bit better. He wasn't doing that.

He was enunciating the way of his kingdom, but the rules of his kingdom are one thing, the way into his kingdom is quite another. Let us listen to our Lord's diagnosis of what is wrong and what is necessary. Here again, perhaps, our ideas of what our Lord taught on the subject of morality might need some revising. Is it not the common notion that the way into God's kingdom is to be good? So long as we reach a moderately decent standard of goodness at last, do we have hopes of getting in? And of course, being good does mean keeping the law, keeping the golden rule, and doing unto my neighbour as I would have my neighbour do unto me; or at least doing it fairly often.

That springs again from a lamentably inadequate notion of God's standards of morality. As our Lord pointed out to the learned rabbi Nicodemus, 'The way into God's kingdom is not by moral effort in the sense of keeping the moral rules and regulations. A person is so sinful and falls so lamentably short of God's standards that unless they are born again, they shall not enter the kingdom of God.' When Nicodemus raised his eyebrows at that, our Lord explained, 'It is like this Nicodemus, it is not so much what a person does, as what a person

is. Whatever is born of flesh is flesh. Inasmuch as the human nature with which we are born is a perverted thing, it's altogether inadequate to think that some course in moral training is going to turn that fleshly human nature into something fit for God's kingdom. Something far more drastic is needed; namely, that a person be regenerated, that God performs a function upon their whole being and that they be born again so that they can enter into the kingdom of God.'

If it is accepted that the Jesus Christ of history expounded God's standards of morality in this fashion, we ought to next ask how seriously he regarded our breach of God's moral law. How much does it matter? This is one of the most profoundly disturbing things that our Lord ever said. We may need to brace ourselves to face it, yet face it we must if ever we are going to understand God's love and discover it for ourselves, and enjoy it as love that is genuine love. He taught us that God's moral law is absolute, not relative. He taught us that God's moral law is eternal, nor merely temporary. He taught us that it is unchangeable: that heaven and earth will pass away before one iota of that law should fail (Matt 5:18).

It sounded strange coming from him; at least it sounded strange to his contemporaries. The Pharisees in particular, so we are told by more than one historian, had got themselves in the way of deriding Jesus of Nazareth. They were very sceptical of his popular evangelizing of the crowds, his receiving men and woman and saying their sins were forgiven and assuring them that they were accepted by God and were saved. Senior Pharisees had taken to denouncing our Lord for this: they said it was the height of immorality. This would play into the arms of lax living, they said, and what you ought to preach is that a person does depend on their moral striving. If you kept people on their tiptoes, never knowing for certain what would happen to them in eternity, then you would get the maximum of good behaviour out of them. So they dubbed our Lord a rather inefficient theologian, altogether too lax.

There came days when he turned the tables. Our Lord had been speaking to his disciples, not now of the condition on which they might enter God's heaven, but speaking to men whom he had assured of eternal life. He began to tell them how to conduct themselves now they were saved and were sure of entrance at last to heaven. He began to show them the attitude they must adopt towards material things. He urged them to use all their assets, whether financial or mental, for the furtherance of God's kingdom, for the benefit of their fellow man and woman, that they might make friends thereby. Friends of the sort that they would meet again in the life to come in God's kingdom. This was a new idea to the Pharisees, to take religion so seriously that it affected your cash and your private life. The idea that eternity is so real that you can treat this life and eternity in a business-like manner, and deliberately live so that eternity will be stocked for you with friends.

As one historian tells us, it cut them to the quick. At heart, they were lovers of money. Their reaction was openly to deride this young preacher from Nazareth. They'd never heard anything so ridiculous in all their life. They said, 'Isn't this absurd and extreme? Living for eternity, conducting your business in the light of eternity?' Said our Lord, 'You seem to have some loose idea of God's morality. You should be careful lest your standards are merely relative standards, that you are being good and respectable because it's a good thing to be respectable in the sight of your fellow men and women. But God knows your hearts' (Luke 16:14-15). The fact is that God's moral standards are so absolute that not one iota, not a dot,

will be remitted. 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away,' said our Lord. 'This is something eternal' (Matt 24:35).

He went on to tell that famous story of a man who, with much show of religion, had trifled with God's moral standards and had taken the view that they were relative. If a person doesn't keep them too well, in the end all will be alright. The famous story, and as far as I read the historians, we have no right to call it a parable, is about the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. Both died, and both opened their eyes in eternity, the rich man in hell and in torment. Why in hell? Certainly not because he was rich—Christ was no rabid socialist or communist. But the man had professed to be religious; he had professed to believe a Bible that said, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' For all his profession, he did not really believe that the Bible meant what it said. He found out that God's moral standards are absolute and eternal. One of the most profoundly disturbing things our Lord ever uttered was his description of that man's position. 'There is,' said he, 'a great chasm that has been fixed' (see Luke 16:19–26). It was because our Lord believed it and taught it that he was heard to advise his fellow men and women, 'If you find your hand or your eye or your foot, causing you to stumble and leading you into sin, it would be better for you if you cut off that hand or foot, and pluck out that eye, and that you entered into life maimed and at a disadvantage rather than that you sin and be thrown into hell.' (see Mark 9:43–47)

He pressed home his exhortation with another of those reminders that God's moral law is absolute and eternal. He said, 'In hell their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' (see Mark 9:48). He was borrowing phrases from the Old Testament where the prophet is describing some whom God will be obliged to make an object lesson of in the coming day. If a dead body is left, it rots. The worms eat it until there is nothing more to be eaten and then they go away. If you burn a corpse, the fire will burn until no corpse is left. But as for these people, it is said that their worm will not die and the flame will not go out. Somehow theirs is to be a permanent and eternal condition. Our Lord takes those words and applies them to the spiritual realm to impress upon us how absolute, how eternal are God's moral standards, and how eternal the consequences for those who have fallen below God's holy requirements and have not availed themselves of God's salvation.

Somebody will say that this is extraordinarily gloomy. Have we not wandered away from the love of God with which we began? But if ever we are going to understand what God's love is, and how that love has expressed itself in salvation; if ever we are going to have a view of God's love as something more than cheap sentiment, a fantasy of wishful thinking, we must face our own moral state as God sees it. Let us be assured that God loves us even though we are yet sinners. Let us understand the magnitude of that love by first seeing in what kind of moral condition God sees us. For there is certainly forgiveness, and though God's moral law is absolute and eternal, there is a way of pardon. There is a way of release from what would otherwise be an utterly inescapable condition. There is a forgiveness, but we shall observe that the way of God's forgiveness, the way of a person's salvation, as it is described in the New Testament, is one of the profoundest statements of morality that you will find anywhere in all the Bible. God's forgiveness is not the easy going thing that some people imagine.

I know we have quoted the parable of the Prodigal Son. We are told that the father that longed for the man to come back is God, and when he came back the father welcomed him in

immediately, restored him to his position and conveniently forgot about the past. Now it is true indeed that when a sinner comes back in genuine repentance towards God, God will receive them, and indeed he will go further than some people would have him go, for he will assure that person they are accepted and will never be cast out. That particular parable was aimed at getting under the skin of men and women who were behaving like the elder brother, who were objecting to people being saved and knowing it. And in consequence, that particular parable doesn't serve to illustrate what I might call the mechanics or the basis of God's forgiveness. We need to be very wary of the sort of proposition that, because God is a God of love, he will welcome anybody at any time, he will never punish anybody, and doesn't really need a sacrifice before he will forgive anyone.

Our Lord put it this way as he instituted what became the earliest of all the ceremonies that the early church kept. As he instituted the holy communion, he took wine as a symbol of his blood. He said, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt 26:28). Notice that term. You will perceive at once that it is not merely an airy and breezy matter of coming back to God and saying, 'Alright, now let's start from square one.' There are accounts to be settled. God's morality will not be at peace until those accounts are honoured and fully settled. What did Christ mean when he said that he was going to shed his blood for forgiveness? Let me quote you another saying of his that he made around about this time: 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

He was alluding to the great prophecy of Isaiah (ch. 53) in which, before Messiah came, his redemptive role was sketched out—how that Messiah was to be pierced for our transgressions and be crushed for our iniquities. How the chastisement that brought us peace was to be on him; how we were to be healed through his wounds. That famous prophecy contains the profound phrase, 'Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief' (v. 10). I would not pretend to try and explain the atonement. Who can pierce through that veil of thick darkness which God caused to surround our Lord's cross? Or adequately describe what our Lord meant when he cried that God had forsaken him? But it is evident that when our Lord hung upon the cross, God bruised him. God put him to grief. That somehow on that occasion, God took up with him the controversy of human sin. And in the coin of suffering, Christ paid the ransom that would deliver mankind from an impasse that would otherwise be eternal.

Oh yes, God certainly wanted to forgive, but the love of God that seeks to forgive people is not an easy-going carefree love that will take the view that sin doesn't matter. If God took that view, who knows but that heaven wouldn't turn out to be the hell that this earth has turned out to be? God cares. There will be no Hitlers in heaven to gas six million Jews, because God cares about sin. And there won't be people in heaven that diddled their income tax either, because the way that God cares about sin is absolute. God will forgive a person and he will receive them, but not at the expense of saying sin doesn't matter. And because sin matters, our Lord informed us that he would have to be lifted up. 'The Son of Man,' he said, 'must be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:14–15). We have come to the heart of the Christian gospel. The cross of Christ is the place, par excellence, where we may see the love of God in all its staggering and breath-taking dimensions.

It still staggers people, even those who talk about God's love, when they are told that the sacrifice of Christ is so valid, and has covered sin so thoroughly, that now God is prepared to offer a person absolute forgiveness. That God is prepared to tell a person that if they repent and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour, they are saved now and shall remain saved eternally. It staggers people to discover that the love of God is so infinite that it has paid all the expense of human sin. That God's love is so courageous that it is prepared to tell a person here and now on earth, not to keep them in suspense, that God has received them. And that all their sin—past, present and future—is covered by that great atoning sacrifice of Christ.

That is a staggering thing: would to God that all of our fellow men and women knew it. Would to God that they daily enjoyed the love of God in that realistic way and find all their security there. God has estimated my sin, God has paid for my sin. He hasn't got to pretend that I'm better than I am. He knows what I am. He will never be surprised by what I shall subsequently do, for he knew it from the start. It doesn't mean that if I trust Christ and receive God's assurance of salvation I am free to go on and live as I please. Certainly not. There was an occasion, do you remember, where some people got this wrong.

A woman had been taken in adultery and brought before our Lord. I needn't repeat all the details of how the religious people of the day, who were out to overturn his ideas of evangelism, thought they were going to get him in a difficult position and make him look foolish (see John ch. 8). The upshot of the story was that that woman, too, found forgiveness. She found in our Lord the assurance that she would never come into condemnation. There were people around and they heard this. Presently they said they believed and they came along to the Lord to be taught. 'Alright,' said our Lord, 'we take it from here, do we? You believe? You are now converted and you are Christians, very good. Now this is the next lesson. When a person knows that they are saved and will never come into condemnation, when they know that they are loved of God and he will never cast them out, then this is where God really gets down to the root of that person's sin and begins to straighten out their personality.' He said, 'If you continue in my word, you will be my disciples indeed and you shall progressively get to know the truth, and the truth shall progressively set you free.'

'Free from what?' they said.

'Free from sin. What did you think?'

'Look here, we'd thank you to say a little less about sin. We're getting a bit weary of this. You'd think that we were vicious people. You keep talking about us being in bondage to sin and we dislike the term.'

Said our Lord, 'This is what salvation is about, being free from sin.'

They got angry, but he had to be blunt. The person that thinks there is a salvation that permits them thereafter to go on and do as they please show themselves on the wrong side. Said our Lord, 'You are of your father the devil' (v. 44).

When a person has genuinely repented and received Christ you will find that they have a genuine desire to go on with Christ, to learn in Christ's school and to allow Christ progressively to set them free from sin. Do you not see how sound this method is? It may be long, who knows how long, before that person will be fully and finally set free from their last sinful attitude. But now see the love of God that has paid all the expenses of their education, and guarantees to them that their acceptance with God does not depend on how well they

progress. So the man or woman finds courage to turn around and face themselves, to begin those long and painful struggles that ensue when Christ really turns a person inside out and gets them to look at themselves realistically.

So then salvation, through the love and the sacrifice of Christ, is possible on these terms. But it must start here: that a person finds out the inadequacy of their own morality and learns what it is to trust the saviour. For if one verse tells us that, 'God so loves the world that he gave his son that whoever believes should have eternal life,' its adjacent verse tells us how Christ 'must be lifted up, that whoever believes on him may have eternal life.' The term was borrowed from an Old Testament story. When the Israelites on an occasion had sinned and were bitten by serpents in God's judgment, God commanded that a brazen serpent be lifted up on a pole, and he proclaimed that whoever would look to that pole would live. Our Lord said to Nicodemus the theologian, 'I shall be lifted up, and a person's salvation starts when they learn to look and to believe. Those who looked to that serpent in ancient times were those who had come to the deliberate admission that their wound was incurable.'

I am persuaded that there are many people who have never yet entered into peace with God, who cannot honestly say that they are saved and have eternal life, because they have never yet accepted God's standards of morality. Instead of abandoning faith in themselves and looking solely to Christ and his cross and sacrifice, they look within. They look for rising feelings of worthiness. They try to see how they could merit being saved. They look for some improvement of conduct. Until these things appear they wouldn't dare to say they were saved. Consciously or unconsciously they are trying to build up something in themselves that will bring them over the bar, high enough to be sure that God loves them and has received them. It were a kindness, so to batter down their self-confidence by a display and demonstration of God's standards of morality, that in desperation and in despair of themselves, they learn to look completely away from self and put their trust only in the saviour and in his atoning sacrifice upon the cross.

Disconcertingly Joyful!

The Popular View

It is a matter of simple observation that many people find religion an unadulterated and irrelevant bore. Even those who consider religion necessary in some sense very frequently look upon it as they do a visit to the dentist—something that is rather painful but has to be done in the interest of health. So they act very sensibly and discipline themselves to make the minimum number of attendances.

Others are more sophisticated in their criticisms of religion, and in particular the Christian religion. If there must be religion at all they would prefer the ancient and pagan religions, such as the Greek religions with their gorgeously sensual mythology; with religion harnessed to the arts and the lovely dramas of the ancient world and with their not too stringent moral codes. It was, after all, a severe criticism of Christianity that was levelled in the verse, ‘Thou has conquered, O pale Galilean,’ for that line is followed by its explanation, ‘The world has grown grey from thy breath.’² An indictment that the Christian religion has taken the colour and the zest out of life, and left us with Puritanical standards and a very grey world.

In this modern day there are a growing number of people for whom religion, of whatever kind, is frankly irrelevant and a bore. This has always been so and our Lord himself recognised it in the parable that he told of the people that were invited to the grand banquet in the kingdom of God. Each one of them made their particular excuse as to why they should not turn up—frankly because they considered that the banquet of Christian religion was not to their taste. They would prefer maybe their business or social life, but for them religion was anything but enjoyable (see Luke 14:12–24).

The Bible’s View

While this is the common view, we should not allow it to hide the fact that in the ancient records our Lord stands out somewhat differently. Indeed to the critics of Christianity he appeared as disturbingly joyful, altogether too joyful to be truly religious. They caricatured him in the phrase that he was ‘a glutton and a drunkard’ (Matt 11:19). Their slander was exaggerated, of course, but behind it we can perceive a character that must have been exceedingly happy, naturally sociable, and far removed from the image of an ascetic, religious man that his contemporaries held to be true religion.

² A. C. Swinburne (1837–1909), ‘Hymn to Proserpine’.

What is perhaps most interesting of all is that this figure of someone who was disturbingly joyful was connected, in the Pharisee's mind at any rate, with the very heart of our Lord's religion. It was not so much that he was personally jovial, but rather that his religious activities were accompanied with a joyful spirit, almost bordering upon excitement. 'This man,' they said in dismay, 'receives sinners and eats with them: look at him, a drunkard and a glutton.' And our Lord did nothing to dispel the thing that seemed to grieve them so much. This joy, this cheerfulness that centred around his evangelical activities, he illustrated and pressed home on the dismayed Pharisees with such parables as the prodigal son. He described the return home of the prodigal to the father's house, not accompanied by him singing and praying, but by him singing and dancing—the whole band and orchestra, and a banquet! This was adding fuel to the fire. This wasn't the way the Pharisee was accustomed to take his religion. Our Lord deliberately used the terms for undeniably our Lord found a tremendous enjoyment in his evangelical activity and seemed surprised that the Pharisees could not perceive what it was that gave him such a great joy.

He said, 'Suppose one of you, being a farmer, lost a sheep. You wouldn't sit down content with the ninety-nine sheep you still had, but you would go out over the mountains after the lost one, and when you found it and brought it home you would make a tremendous fuss. You would gather the neighbours and hold a celebration and say, "Rejoice with me for my lost sheep has been found." And if a woman lost a valuable piece of silver from the middle of her tiara, wouldn't she make a tremendous fuss, lighting a light and sweeping the house until she found it? And her face would glow with joy and gladness at her success in finding this lost bit of silver. And you gentlemen would do it if it were your business and your cash. How is it that your joy doesn't carry over into religion? How is it that you count it strange that I am joyful when I find a person long since lost to God and bring them back? Or that I count it a joyful thing to sit by the side of prostitute or a collaborator, like a tax-collector for the Romans and, little by little, bring them back to God and watch the joy of their spirit as they become reconciled to God. How is it that you count that strange?'

Yet they did count it strange, for there was very little room in the religion of the Pharisees for that kind of joy. They were accustomed to the art of proselytising. Some of them would have compassed land and sea to make one convert. That was merely a matter of changing from one form of religion to another: being a Greek and becoming a Jew. But the joy of sitting by someone's side and leading them personally to God, watching a person experiencing that revolution which the New Testament calls salvation—Pharisees on the whole were strangers to that joy. In consequence, they missed what our Lord confirmed was one of the chief delights of religion, indeed one of the chief delights of heaven. 'There is more joy,' said he, 'among the angels of God, over one sinner that repents, than over those ninety-nine very formal religious people who have no need of repentance' (Luke 15:7). He wasn't saying that formal deliberate religion was bad, but he was readjusting our sense of proportion and saying that the greatest joy is over that personal experience of a person coming to God and being saved.

The Pharisees did find this a strange thing because they were not used to the experience of leading their fellow men and women back to God. Likewise, they had no understanding of the joy that began in the minds of those who were thus converted. You'll remember that occasion when there came, along with the Pharisees, some very orthodox disciples of John the

Baptist. With their thinly veiled criticisms of our Lord's evangelical mission their query was this, 'Why don't your disciples fast? The Pharisees' disciples fast and John's disciples fast but your disciples don't fast. How is this?' (Matt 9:14).

We may perceive what was going through their minds. To their way of thinking religion was a discipline. It had its joyful moments—they enjoyed the aesthetics of the temple service, the beautiful singing in the choir, the magnificent language of the Old Testament. But when it came to personal religion, in their mind it was a discipline. On certain days you fasted and the more often you fasted, the more religious you were. On set feasts and holidays you made it your business to get up early in the morning and attend divine service in the temple. The only particular joy that came from it was, perhaps, the joy of achievement when, as a result of your discipline, you had reason to feel that you had become better than some other people. Now they looked on Christ's converts and the leading marks of religion seemed to be absent. They didn't fast, there were no rigorous rules. Instead there was what they may well have thought was excitement and spurious emotion. 'Why don't your disciples fast?' was their question.

Now our Lord was very far from saying that discipline in religion was not necessary. He said quite plainly that, 'The days will come when my disciples will fast.' And certainly those days did come when their experience matured, and when they found out what a struggle true spiritual experience is. Said our Lord, 'But though they will presently fast when the need arises, you cannot expect people to fast who are recently converted and in the first flush of the joy of salvation. Would you fast at a wedding breakfast while the bridegroom is still present? It would be ludicrous. A wedding is an occasion of joy, and while the bridegroom is present nobody would dream of fasting. So is it with these men. The bridegroom is still with them, and while he is, you'll not get these men to fast.'

Notice the terms and figures he used. The experience that these men had gone through was like a woman when she meets her bridegroom. This was a day of joy, a day of gladness, a day when people felt they wanted the joy to be unconfined. 'Now,' said our Lord, 'I admit that their joy may seem to be undisciplined but you wouldn't put new wine into old skins, would you? You must allow this new wine to ferment, to work, to move. You will not tie down new wine in old, hard, rigid skins that have no room for moving. Later on, by reason of the opposition they will find when I leave them and ascend to heaven, when the world turns to persecute them, these men will be driven to the sternest of religious disciplines. But for the moment you must allow their new found joy to express itself.'

We do well to listen in. There are sad churches, even in our present day, whose rules are so rigid that they make no allowance for the new joy of a person who, for the first time, has discovered salvation. And it is indeed a sad kind of Christian who has never had that thrilling experience of bringing a fellow man or woman into that personal salvation, or who has never felt within their own breast the true ferment of joy that comes through experiencing true salvation. I suppose it takes somebody who has experienced it to know exactly what our Lord was referring to.

But even at this length in time, can we not catch something of the excitement of the first converts to Christianity? Take Peter and Andrew, for instance. We hear their excited phrases as they go, each on their way to find their nearest relatives, with the startling news, 'We have

found the Messiah!' These men had suddenly discovered the secret of the ages; they had discovered the Christ who makes sense of history. They had discovered a saviour who will make sense of the future. They are to be excused their excitement as they run off in great joy to tell their fellows to come and see, 'We have found the Messiah.'

If a great and famous scientist was allowed to run out of his bath shouting *eureka* at having discovered some little detail of scientific knowledge, may they not be permitted a little excitement? Those who have discovered the Christ of the ages, and found the meaning of life and its purpose? There was Peter, a man who had suddenly become conscious of his personal sin, not through some long diatribe at an evangelical meeting. The saviour of mankind had stepped into his boat, and coming alongside Christ and measuring himself up with him, Peter had come to the grim experience of conviction of sin. And he had been led through that to discover the sheer joy of Christian salvation in the forgiveness of sins. You couldn't blame him for the joy that naturally followed that emotional release.

Then there was that woman from Samaria who, for all her life, had found religion somewhat of a bore—dry as dust, a matter of reading ancient books and reciting ancient liturgies—who discovered what Christ meant when he talked about this gift of God that wells up inside like a spring of fresh and bubbling water; something that doesn't have to be worked up with discipline but springs up naturally. You would excuse that woman her excitement as she ran off to the village. Not caring now what they would say about her and her murky past she turned evangelist and tried to drag the people of the village to come and meet this saviour that had satisfied her heart and longings.

I suppose it was because the Pharisees had not had any such personal experience in religion at all that made it so easy for them to criticise Christ's converts. We today should draw the lesson in our own churches. We shall find that this element of spontaneous joy is indeed a true element of religion. Away back in the Old Testament we find King David composing and reciting some of his most magnificent psalms as an outburst of joy, and in particular the joy of personal salvation and the experience of forgiveness of sins. Picture him taking his harp and strumming it in the palace to the words, 'Oh the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven, whose iniquities are covered.' In our own Christian era, not only does the New Testament record that converts found this joy, but down the centuries we've had our hymn writers who have recorded the same. I only have to quote Philip Doddridge's delightful expression of personal experience.

Oh happy day that fixed my choice,
On Thee, my Saviour and my God!
Well may this glowing heart rejoice,
And tell its raptures all abroad.³

It is a sad person and a sad church that have so little experience of the joy that Christ came to bring that they would regard Doddridge's hymn as questionable jargon and doggerel.

Perhaps the secret of this Christian joy is nowhere more prominent than in our Lord's first and notable miracle. It is a thing to be noticed that when our Lord began his public ministry

³ Philip Doddridge (1702–51).

he began it not in church, nor even in the synagogue. He did not even begin with a sermon but we are told he began his public ministry with his first miracle, at a wedding feast in a little village called Cana of Galilee. On that occasion, halfway through the wedding feast the wine ran out. And pedantic historians have laboured long to find reasons why the wine should run out. They've hazarded the guess that our Lord arrived bringing a whole host of disciples unexpectedly, and the parents of the bride hadn't made provision enough for this inrush of gate crashers. We shall not trouble with their research, for this story of a miracle, while it is certainly a miracle, was evidently meant to be a parable.

For the wine, not only at weddings but of a good many other experiences, does run out. Human relationships that were meant to yield their pleasant joys do sometimes break up, and sometimes break up all together. So often in life people find that the goal they were so enthusiastically chasing, when at last it is within their grasp, somehow loses its charm. The joy, the wine, runs out. Our Lord, so we are told through this miracle and this parable, restored that joy. It seems to me that this was a deliberately chosen occasion, so that our Lord should thereby characterise what his whole mission was going to be. His mission would concern itself with human lives which were broken, from which the joy had run out. And his concern would be to bring back that joy, and to bring it back in even greater measure than it had been before. It is interesting to see his way of accomplishing it.

As with all the signs recorded by the fourth evangelist, this sign is an active parable. In the process of turning that water to wine we read that he took the water pots that were standing there on the perimeter of the room, water pots that had previously been used in the religious service of the Jews. They were there for religious cleansing. The Lord took them and ordered them to be filled with water, and then turned that water into wine. His gesture is exceedingly significant. At the minimum, what he is saying is that the secret of true joy in life, and in its relationships, is that we should put religion central. It is from true religion that a person's principal joy should spring.

For many people this is a startling thing. We commonly don't regard religion as life's principal joy. We may regard it, as I said earlier, as a necessary discipline if we're going to be decent and keep society within bounds. We don't commonly regard it as a source of our main joy. In fact, on occasions we find religion positively embarrassing. These people at the wedding had been through the religious ceremonies and had solemnised the marriage. Now the time for religion was over, they were at the wedding breakfast. Now bring on the wine and let joy be unconfined. And it does seem to me that Christ is putting his finger on that very attitude.

It ought not to be that religion is the solemn part, and thereafter comes the fun and games and the joy. It ought to be that the religious part is the fountain of the principal joy. We notice that those pots were there for purifying. The Jews had their ceremonies too, designed to remind us all that we are unclean men and women, that our characters and our consciences are smudged and that we do need cleansing. Their ceremonies symbolically admitted that fact, but it was all very chilly stuff. It wasn't the thing to do, to remind your guests at the wedding breakfast that they needed cleansing and that they needed personally to get right with God. Yet it was precisely the water pots that were there for cleansing that our Lord took, and turned them to the source of the party's greatest joy.

Let us put it in modern terms. How would a hostess feel at a wedding if, after the church service were over, one of the guests were to rise to his feet in the middle of the speeches and start to give his personal testimony as to how he had found Christ? How Christ had saved him, how he had found forgiveness of sins and how this had brought colour and joy into his life. Wouldn't many a hostess be fearfully embarrassed? I think it was Sir Alfred Owen, that great business magnate in England, who was converted as an undergraduate in Cambridge and has lived long since to demonstrate the reality of that conversion. When it came to his 21st birthday party he went home to his rather palatial home and presently, a suitable occasion presenting itself amongst the festivities, he rose to his feet and related to his guests his personal and recent experience—how he had met with Christ and had been converted, the difference it meant to him and the joy that it had brought him. And the guests? They very soon donned their overcoats and departed.

I would like to inquire why we find this personal experience of salvation so positively embarrassing. Perhaps it is that naturally we don't like to wear our hearts on our sleeves and because, to many people, this business of being saved always appears as a religious achievement. We are of course trying to be good and worthy citizens, but we don't boast about our attainments. When one of our friends comes along and merrily and obscenely begins to talk about his joy of being saved, we take it hard. We feel the fellow is showing off, he's boasting of being superior to us lesser mortals. Of course we don't like the thing that he implies, that he's better than we are. But then, if that is the reason, we thereby show that we have got altogether the wrong understanding of Christianity.

Of course if salvation were an achievement to which I attain by my strenuous religious discipline, then I could well take it hard that the other man says he's arrived when I haven't. But Christianity says the very opposite. Salvation is not something that we arrive at by a stern discipline, it is a gift. It is a life that is given to us. 'By grace you have been saved,' says the Bible, 'it is through faith and not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8-9). The claim to have received salvation in this sense is not a boast, it is the very opposite. It is the admission of personal inadequacy and bankruptcy. It is a claim to have discovered that Jesus Christ came among mankind to give them something. Would you take it hard if your brother runs downstairs on Christmas morning, shouting at the top of his voice with glee at the Christmas present he's just unwrapped and saying, 'That's just what I wanted, what a lucky fellow I am?' Of course not, it is a gift isn't it? He's not boasting that he's better than you, merely giving vent to his feelings of gratitude at such a remarkable gift.

But then, of course, there are deeper reasons for our unease. We find this matter of the need of being cleansed and forgiven to be chilly stuff, for a very clear reason. How will a person whose conscience is not at rest, who is not certain where they stand with God, find God enjoyable? They may respect him, they may pay their spiritual rates and taxes, but a person who is not certain that God has accepted them, and who lives with a conscience that fears God may ultimately reject them, cannot find religion a joy of heart. Quite the opposite, they find that the very mention of religion, and particularly of personal religion, merely probes that already uneasy conscience, and casts a grey cloud over an otherwise sunny day. Our Lord has put his finger right on the spot. We do not find religion enjoyable because somewhere or other we have not understood this matter of personal cleansing.

And is it not likewise true that our joys in life run out because of the quirks of our character—our little envies, spites and revenges? Our hidden neuroses, maybe, which we inflict upon our friends until our relationships are strained? Thus it is that the joy of many a marriage runs out, and likewise in many other relationships. If, therefore, we are to find religion enjoyable, we must face this matter of personal cleansing and what Christ has to say; and discover how personal salvation can begin to affect our personal relationships. Christ turns the water of cleansing into the wine of enjoyment. He tells us that he has not come to criticise us, judge us or find fault with us. He hasn't come to preach us some moral sermons. He has come, he informs us, to die for us, that through his sacrifice he might offer people God's complete forgiveness. And to offer them that forgiveness here and now in this life, unreserved, so that they might discover that God has accepted them as they are, and never will reject them. He comes, in a word, to offer mankind forgiveness.

It was this that sent the early Christian missionaries around the Roman Empire. This was the burden of their message. They very often didn't stop to preach long diatribes against sin, for most of their fellow men and women knew that they were sinners. What they did preach was, 'We have found God's Christ, he has died for us, risen again, and God has commanded us to tell people that, in his name, they may receive absolute forgiveness of sins.' It was the message that God loves us while we are yet sinners, and that God can receive us just as we are, before we improve and apart from our spiritual disciplines. On the basis of Christ's sacrifice God grants us his acceptance, unconditional and undeserved, and independent of our subsequent strivings.

When a person grasps that, it begins to set loose the wells of joy within them. To know that they are accepted by God, that they are personally forgiven; to be assured from the saviour himself that, because of his sacrifice they shall never come into judgment. To know that Christ's sacrifice has cleansed their guilt and that God can receive them in all realism. To be sure that because God still loves them and Christ has died for them, they shall never be rejected. To know, therefore, that God's love for them does not even depend on their spiritual progress; that they are accepted by God, and will ever remain accepted. Thus it is that when people first discover it, it sets their hearts aflame with joy.

'Oh the blessedness,' says Paul the apostle as he re-echoes the discovery that King David made, 'Oh the blessedness of the person to whom God never will impute their sin.' That person has found forgiveness. This is important, for many people would tell a sinner that God will eventually accept them if they come up to a certain percentage of good behaviour. When a person has made their best effort to come up to that certain percentage and has continually failed, they are not likely to find religion particularly enjoyable. It is but a constant reminder of their failure. The person who has discovered God's love in Christ has discovered a love that is bigger than all their failures, a love that has underwritten all their mistakes, a love that is prepared to receive them now and guarantee that it will never reject them.

And yet it is a love that will not rest content until that person's character has been perfected. Our Lord's choosing of this happy day of a wedding, it seems to me, was not by mistake. For a New Testament comment subsequently made by Paul runs like this,

That Christ too loved the church like a man loves his wife, and gave himself for her, that he might cleanse her by the washing of water through the word, that he might eventually present the church to himself, an all glorious thing, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing. (See Eph 5:27)

For when a person finds Christ like this, and finds God's love surrounding them, and knows they are received by God and will never be cast out, it begins to set that person free in God's presence. It begins to give them the courage to turn around and face themselves. Whatever they discover in their character, whatever emerges from the dark depths of their past, whatever perversities and twists they find, they're no longer afraid to face them. For they know that God's love does not depend on them, or on their overcoming them. God has loved them in Christ and, knowing all about their flaws, has loved them still and forgiven them freely. Moreover, it is not merely forgiveness that does away with the gloom of the past, that removes skeletons from the cupboard. It is a forgiveness that casts its joyous beams on towards the future. Let me remind you of that other occasion that the historians record as being an occasion of particular joy and a thing over which Christ bid his disciples that they were to rejoice.

I refer to the occasion recorded by Luke the historian when the disciples had come back from their first mission. With busy zeal they had gone out and evangelised the district for Christ, they had cast out demons, performed miracles and had preached their sermons. They came back with great enthusiasm telling the Lord about all they had done. Our Lord naturally understood their joy and their gladness in his service. But presently he said, 'Gentlemen, now don't rejoice so much that the demons are subject to you and that you've had some success in your mission, but rather rejoice supremely and above all in this, that your names are written in heaven' (see Luke 10:17-20). The phrase is interesting. Your names are enrolled, we might paraphrase it, in the citizen lists of heaven. In this rejoice. It spelled out in the first place that there is a future, that God has his program, a citizen body of redeemed people with which he is to populate the age to come. And these men were bidden to rejoice because here on earth they had discovered this future and they were utterly certain of participation in the glorious scheme that lay ahead. 'Your names are written in heaven.'

Our joy in this life may be to the full but if a person has no certainty with regard to the life to come, then some of the lustre eventually dies away from that joy. And the more they have enjoyed this life, the more will they will cleave to it. I know it is alright to talk like the ancient pagans, that when we have had our fill of life we ought gracefully to retire from the banquet and let other generations come to the table. It sounds good in theory. Retiring from life is one thing, being eaten to death by cancer is another. And how many people are there that have had so much as their fill of this life anyway? Life has an unhappy way of introducing us early to its pains and sufferings and frustrations. When we see what life could be if only it were not for human pig-headedness and stupidity; if only it were not for disease; if only it were not for sin; if only it were not for my own twisted character. When I see what life could be, then the idea that this majestic thing must end solely in worms in the grave is a depressing thought.

This surely would be supreme among the joys of life, if a person could be sure that there was a life to come. If they could be sure that there was some scheme worthy of all their powers

and ambitions; if there was indeed a divine program that would make this life meaningful, as a preparatory school that would qualify us for the subsequent enjoyment. 'In this rejoice,' said our Lord, 'that you know there is such a future, and that you know that your part in it is guaranteed, for your names are written in heaven.' Again we catch the certainty of our Lord's phrase. It's a phrase you will find echoed again and again throughout the Apostles' letters and the later books of the New Testament. It did turn out to be one of the early Christians' principal joys. Paul, writing from prison to some of his converts in the church at Philippi mentions it, in passing so to speak, as one of these lovely things that all Christians so enjoy. Talking of some of his fellow workers, he says, 'Their names are written in heaven.'

The Christian church in the midst of its persecution under Nero comforted themselves with this consideration, that their names were written in the Lamb's Book of Life. A future that not only held joy, but held no ultimate terror. They looked with calmness at the prospect of the final great assize. For they were taught that at that final Assize the thing that shall determine a person's destiny is simply this, whether or not his name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. They have been told that they could know it here on earth, and the certainty went back to our Lord for it was our Lord himself who told us that a person could be utterly certain in this life that their name is in that Book. Therefore the future held no terror for them, but rather joy. And it was a certainty and a joy that gave meaning not only to the joys of this life, but to its sorrows too. For if there is an eternity of glorious achievement and adventure with God, if there is a destiny worthy of God for redeemed humanity, then even life's pains are worth enduring.

And if, in the good hand of God, those pains could be turned to teach us valuable lessons and shape the development of our characters, then might we not even find cause for thankful rejoicing in our pains? But it follows that if a person lacks this certainty, if their religion amounts to little more than that they are trying to discipline themselves but have no certainty of the ultimate outcome, how would you expect them to find religion positively joyful? We might ask ourselves, then, in closing, why it was that our Lord's contemporaries missed, and seemingly some of them deliberately so, this joyful side of the religion that Christ brought them?

I would like to answer the question by referring to one other occasion in which our Lord described his ministry as a thing of a joy. You will remember his conversation with the Pharisees when he likened them to children sitting in the market place, shouting to their fellows and saying to them, 'We have piped unto you, and you have not danced; we have mourned unto you and you have not wept' He said to the Pharisees, 'John came to you preaching his stern gospel of repentance and hellfire, and you didn't like that. I came along with my delightful message of God's love and forgiveness and you didn't like that either' (see Matt 11:16-19). How strange it was. Christ was likening himself, therefore, to the piping and the dancing. A lovely description of our Lord's ministry.

He came with a message of forgiveness so full and so free that it was like the piping of children for sheer exuberant enjoyment of life—their fun and games in the market place, children upon whose shoulders the cares of life have not yet begun to descend. That's what Christ's gospel was like, a thing of sheer joy. 'I came piping you this glad message of God's forgiveness and the gift of eternal life, the certainty of God's acceptance and the glory and

majesty of the destiny of the redeemed, and you didn't want it.' Why didn't they want it? The question is relevant even now. Why is it that so much religion still will not have it that a person can be certain that their sins are forgiven? That a person can be certain that they are right with God and be sure of God's heaven? Why is it that so much religion still denies that basic fountain of Christian joy?

Perhaps the answer is now as it was then. The Pharisees could not altogether see that they had any need of such salvation. Had they not, as infants, been along to the temple and been circumcised at eight days old? Hadn't they been dedicated in their lives according to their Jewish religion? Hadn't they since then been moderately decent? They rejected the implications of John's preaching that they too, along with the prostitute, needed to repent and be saved. They would have admitted to you the odd minor sin here or there, but surely nothing serious enough to warrant God's wrath? And therefore not granting the first thing, they saw no need for the second—the gift of personal salvation and eternal life. And so they missed its joy and gladness and were content with the round of religious discipline. In Christ's estimation, for all their excellent self-discipline, they had but the shell of true religion without its life. They had its external thought but they had missed the fountain of its true joy.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.