

**The Gospel of Authority
and the Path of Discipleship**
Studies in Matthew 8–13

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Contents

1	The Gospel of Authority	3
2	The Path of Discipleship	12
3	Criticisms of our Lord's Authority	21
4	Delegated Authority	30
5	Strategies of the Kingdom	41
6	Learning about the Son	52
	About the Author	64

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The Gospel of Authority

Let us begin by reading in the Gospel by Matthew those well-known words at the end of chapter 7:

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. (7:28–8:1)

Now drop down to 8:18, where we read:

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' Another of the disciples said to him, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' And Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.' And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, 'Save us, Lord; we are perishing.' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marvelled, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?' And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, 'What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?' Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, saying, 'If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.' And he said to them, 'Go.' So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region. And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. (8:18–9:1)

God gives us good understanding of his holy Word.

Two principles in discipleship

When one turns to consider being a disciple of our blessed Lord, there are two ideas that are absolutely basic and necessary to the topic. The two ideas stand together as the two sides of a coin stand together; you cannot have one without the other. The first truth or principle that stands in this topic of discipleship is the *authority* of the Lord Jesus. And then, if we have well established the authority of the Lord Jesus on his side, then on our side there follows the principle that makes up discipleship, which is the principle of *following* the Lord Jesus.

On his side: authority; on our side: to follow.

On his side: to command; on our side: to go where he says.

These are the twin, basic principles to all discipleship, and I want us first of all just to turn over the pages to notice how Matthew weaves these basic principles through the narratives that he now brings before us.

The theme of the authority of the Lord Jesus

Did you notice as we read that the multitudes, having listened to his teaching, were struck by one thing pre-eminently? He taught them 'as one having authority and not as their scribes' (7:29); it was ever a mark of our Lord's teaching. And still today, if we are doing our task in our day and generation, we must know the authority of the word of the Lord. We must not lose our nerve in the authority of our book. For if the authority of holy Scripture and its teaching is undermined, then in proportion, as that authority is lost, so will the quality of our discipleship and our following suffer.

Or again, we look to the story that is told us in chapter 8 where the centurion comes to our Lord Jesus, and he says, 'For I also am a man under authority, and I say to this one, "Go", and he goes, and to the other, "Come", and he comes' (v. 9).

Or if you care to turn over the page to chapter 9, you will hear Matthew emphasise the matter again. Our Lord Jesus says to the crowd, 'but that you may know that the Son of Man has . . .' (v. 6); but then notice the next word. It may read differently in your translation. It may say that the Son of Man 'has *power* on earth to forgive sins', but it is in fact the same word and means that the Son of Man 'has *authority* on earth to forgive sins'. And not content with that, Matthew records in verse 8: 'And when the multitudes saw it, they were afraid and they glorified God, which had given such [and once more it is the same word] authority unto men.'

Now it so happens that both Mark and Luke tell this same story, but if you read it, when they describe the reaction of the crowd they put it slightly differently. It is Matthew who, when he gives us the reaction of the crowd, tells us that among the many things that impressed them in this miracle was the *authority* that God had given to man.

And then we shall notice on another occasion what is said in chapter 10. Let's just notice the phrase this evening: 'And he called unto him his twelve disciples, and he gave them *authority* . . .' (v. 1).

Just let me say that I am not encouraging any of us to become authoritarian. That wouldn't do, would it? But there is, in my humble experience, a need in this troubled modern world for men and women who can speak with authority. When holy Scripture is so

undermined and its authority undermined, and people are, as our Lord observed, 'like sheep going astray, not having a shepherd' (9:36), the first thing that is necessary is a sense of authority.

The authority of course does not reside in us; we are but channels. But here in chapter 10 you observe that the Lord Jesus, as he sent out his disciples, delegated authority to them. A ship will get nowhere unless there is some authority behind the hand that holds the rudder.

The theme of following the Lord Jesus

If the Lord's authority and the authority that he delegates to his disciples and church is the one side of this story, the other side is our response to his authority. That is, that we follow the Lord Jesus. Indeed, that is what is meant by being a *disciple*, a *learner* who, in order to learn, follows the Lord Jesus and hears what he has to say and, having followed him and heard what he has to say, then follows his teaching in a deeper sense. Let's notice how Matthew develops that theme through these chapters.

Following physically is only the start

In chapter 8 we read: 'When he came down from the mountain, great multitudes *followed* him' (v. 1), as was natural. At this stage it merely means that they physically followed him down the mountainside as he came down from the mountain out of the plain. And then, in verses 18 and 19, as he was about to depart to the other side there came a scribe who said, 'Master, I will follow you wherever you go', and Jesus said to him, 'the foxes have holes . . .' and so forth. And the man was still thinking in terms of physically following the Lord Jesus wherever he went, but as we shall see presently, our Lord replied in terms that indicated that following the Lord Jesus is more than just physically following him down the street or across a sea. There is a deeper sense in which we follow the Lord Jesus on a journey, which journey has no goal on earth. It is a journey on which you'll never lay your head down here on earth, nor will you ever until you come to another world.

Then our Lord said to another in verse 22: 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.' Then verse 23 says 'And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him', which is a very natural thing for disciples to do. And, of course, it is a *typical* thing for disciples to do; and if people don't do it, they're not disciples. His disciples followed him. But what a delightful thing it is, for following, being a disciple of this master, does not mean that he commands you to do what he doesn't do himself. It is always a question of following him, as he goes in front.

Discipleship is not optional

Or again, shall we notice in chapter 9: 'As Jesus passed by from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the place of toll, and he said unto him, "Follow me." And he arose and followed him' (v. 9). And perhaps the reason why Matthew speaks to us so much about discipleship and following the Lord is because that's how he got converted.

I don't know how you got converted. Was it through the words, 'he who believes has everlasting life'? Or was it 'he who hears my word shall not perish, but has everlasting life'? If that's how you got converted, I dare say that has coloured all your preaching ever since.

But Matthew got converted by the authority of the word that came to him: 'Follow me', and it left its mark on him for the rest of his days. He hadn't got the concept that being a Christian means that you are saved from hell, and that's alright, and it doesn't matter how you behave. Salvation to Matthew meant an authority that broke the chains that chained him to his very doubtful occupation of being a quisling tax gatherer and set him free to follow the Lord Jesus. Here is the story of a man's conversion, which reminds us of course that discipleship isn't an optional extra.

It's sometimes preached like that, as if there are two things. One is: you get saved. Well that's jolly good, and when you've got used to being saved, then little by little, the preachers gently introduce you to another idea, the deluxe edition: 'You could if you like take it a little bit further. Of course you don't have to, but if you'd like to, there's something called being a disciple.' And sometimes we're afraid to preach otherwise, because we think if we make it too strong to begin with, nobody would start.

There is no such thing as being saved and not being a disciple. Let Matthew tell you what's involved in conversion. 'Follow me,' said Christ to the unconverted Matthew, and Matthew stood up that day a believer, and he followed him. We do well to keep our gospel preaching balanced, so that we let folks see that, right from the very start, it is a question of the Lord's authority and following the Lord Jesus.

Leading us beyond the needs we see

There's more in it than just being converted, of course. Look at chapter 9. As Jairus comes, he bids the Lord Jesus come to his house to lay his hand upon his daughter, because she is even now close to death, and 'Jesus arose and followed him' (v. 19). Do you know that's sometimes a dangerous thing to do? You have a need, some particular need, some particular worry, and you come to the Lord Jesus and you say, 'Now, Lord, come and deal with my need', and the Lord begins to follow you. But you'll want to watch it, because he doesn't follow you for very long. Yes, he'll let you take him to your need, whatever your need is, but presently you'll find he isn't following anymore. He's going on in front and bidding you follow him, and he'll take you right beyond your need, because he's not just interested in helping us with the need that we see. He has plans ahead for us and ideas that we haven't yet grasped, and he won't be content until he has conformed us to his own image. So our Lord began to follow him and he went.

But now notice what Matthew has told us later on: 'And as Jesus passed by from there, two blind men followed him' (v. 27). How difficult it was, all the way down the road, as these poor chaps went feeling their way down the road: 'Where's he got to now?' And so they listened for his voice, and for a while that guided them, and then that went quiet and they didn't know where he'd got to, and then they found out he'd gone into a house.

Have you ever been trying to follow the Lord, and then everything went silent and you didn't know where the Lord had got to? You felt blind, and you were groping your way along and you missed all your landmarks, and the Lord seemed to be playing games with you. Yes, but there are lessons to be learnt on the path of discipleship, not merely at conversion, but all the way along the road home to glory.

So Matthew is talking to us about discipleship and the twin ideas that lie behind it: the authority of the Lord Jesus on the one hand and the following of the disciple on the other.

The gospel of authority

Now, as I said earlier, sometimes when we talk about discipleship we are inclined to talk as though it were something very severe and thus contrast it with the gospel. We represent the gospel as being something lovely, delightful, comforting, rich and free, and that's the bait with which we attract the unconverted. And then, after you've had the nice bit, here comes the nasty bit.

It's like it used to be at school. I went to school, and they tricked you. Oh, it was terrible. They started off with beautiful stories and toys and things. That was marvellous. They gave you the idea that this was what school was going to be like. Then when they'd got you hooked on that, they said to you: 'Arithmetic' and other such abominations. Now you found out that, along with the nice, you had to take the nasty. Horrible it was.

Sometimes we talk about discipleship like that, don't we? 'The gospel is all free, and it's glorious and it's wonderful, but then there comes this painful business of discipleship.' Matthew doesn't make that mistake, as we'll see in chapter 8 that is before us tonight. Let me just briefly indicate that it is in two parts, and the first part deals with what you might describe, quite fairly, as the *gospel* of authority. The second part will deal with the path of discipleship, or we might say, the demands of discipleship.

The nature of our Lord's authority

What do we mean by 'the gospel of authority'? Matthew says that, as our Lord Jesus came down from the mountain, the multitudes followed him. He taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes (see 7:28–8:1). What would his authority be like? What is the nature of the Lord's authority?

If you went to Moscow tonight and could get hold of Yuri Andropov¹ and said, 'I gather you are a very powerful man, sir, you and your fellows in the Kremlin. I wonder whether you would do something for me. Tomorrow being 1 May,² I wondered whether you would give me a demonstration of your authority?' Suppose he consented to give you an exhibition of his authority, what do you suppose he'd do? He would get out, if not cruise missiles then all the other kinds of things he'd got, and have them on big trailers coming through Red Square. And he would say, 'There you are, my boy; you'll do what I say, or else . . .'

And what is the authority of the Lord Jesus like? Please, Matthew, give us a demonstration of the Lord's authority and its nature.

'I will,' says Matthew.

¹ Yuri Andropov (1914–1984), at various times Soviet ambassador to Hungary (including during the 1950s), Chairman of the KGB and General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This last position he held at the time this series was being given and at the time of his death the following year.

² 1 May was designated in the former Soviet Union as the Day of the International Solidarity of Workers.

There came a leper, and what did our Lord say to him? 'You filthy man, get yourself clean will you, or if you don't, don't you come anywhere near me. Get yourself clean, man, or else God will banish you from his heaven forever!'

No, he didn't say that. He said, 'I will. Be thou clean.' He didn't tell the man to make himself clean; he made the man clean (see 8:2-4). That was something new.

Authority over sin

The law said 'make yourself clean.' Christ cleaned the man. There's a big difference, isn't there? Let's put it another way. The law said, 'Dirt and uncleanness will not do.' The law said that if a man were unclean through leprosy, he must be banished. What did Christ say to that?

Now let's get this straight, because some modern preachers and theorists would say that that old law was too severe and that now we must modify it, because the law was cruel: 'The man was unclean, and just imagine banishing him! No, let's say nowadays it doesn't matter so much.'

All kinds of dirt and perversion used to be called sin. It used to be said that these things would pervert society if they were allowed, but now we must take a kindlier attitude to it and say it doesn't matter. That isn't what our Lord said, and presently we shall see he upheld the law. For it would be foolish sentiment to say uncleanness doesn't matter. If you want to keep society clean, then you must banish uncleanness. To say uncleanness doesn't matter is to corrupt the whole of society.

Our Lord did not undermine the law, but at the same time, he didn't just stand there and say, 'Now leper, clean yourself up.' Observe his authority. By his word and power he had the authority to make the man clean. Oh, what a gospel it is! This is a *gospel* of authority. Remember what Paul said to the Corinthians, that filthy lot of folks: 'Such were some of you, but you were washed, cleansed, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus' (see 1 Cor 6:11).

Authority over weakness

You perceived that gospel in the incident with the centurion. He was very good at commanding his troops. That was his job. He knew how to do it. He said to this chap, 'Go there', and he went; and he said to this other fellow, 'Come here', and he came; and he said to someone else, 'Do this' and he did it; and he said to this other chap, 'Go and do something', and he didn't do it. Why didn't he? Because he couldn't: he was paralysed.

What would you say was the thing to do with him then? You say, 'Well let him lie in bed, and be merciful to his weakness.' That's no solution, is it? If the man wanted to be whole, he must be able to answer and obey the command. Our Lord shows the gospel of his authority in that when he said to such a man, 'Get up' then it wasn't only a command, but with the command there was imparted the power to do it.

Authority over fevered distress

And so it was when he came into Simon Peter's house, and his wife's mother lay sick with a fever, turning all around about the place in restless fashion. He showed his authority. Did he say, 'Woman, don't fuss like that. You've had all morning, haven't you, to get the dinner

ready? Can't you do a little thing like that? What are you getting all fussed up about? Now pull yourself together, woman.'

No, he didn't.

When Jesus saw her, he touched her hand, and somehow the authority and calm of his person transmitted itself to the woman, and she was calmed and made fit to serve. This is the gospel of authority; it can still my fevered nerves and make me calm so that I can do my job.

He carries our burdens

This is not law, is it? It's nothing to be ashamed of. This is gospel that says there has come a Saviour with authority to deliver. And so Matthew quotes to us those lovely words from Isaiah as he sums up this passage that deals with the gospel of our Lord's authority, telling us it's just like Isaiah said, 'He himself took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (see 8:17; Isa 53:4). That is, he carried them. The nature of his authority is this: that the king himself, with all his authority, lowered his shoulder and put it under our weaknesses and under our burdens, and he carried them.

What a lovely thing that is, for all of us are broken in some way or another. All of us are weak in some way and defiled. We need somebody with authority against sin, with authority against weakness, with authority against fevered distress, who can come with his strong shoulder and put it underneath our weakness and underneath our disability and carry it.

The source of his authority

Let's pause just for a moment and ask ourselves one other question before we go further. There must have been many people in Israel who looked a bit askance on this Jesus of Nazareth. Here he was getting all the young folks and the older folks around him. He wasn't ordained. Wasn't he a bit of a quack? What would he do with these folks? He had come up to Peter, and the man had left his job. That didn't seem a very balanced and sane thing to do.

Yes, we forget that the world then was like the world is now, and if your daughter had been carted off by Master Moon and joined the Moonies . . .

You say, 'But don't you compare Jesus Christ with the Moonies.'

I wasn't going to, but all I'm saying is that to some of the scribes and Pharisees that's precisely how Jesus Christ appeared: a heretic getting the confidence of people and carting them off. I wonder whose side you would have been on if you had been there. Would you have said, 'Yes, his authority is of God'? Or would you have put a very big question mark over this business of Jesus Christ going around and getting various womenfolk and others following him around Palestine and seeing some of them leave their jobs?

How do you tell true authority from false authority? The problems are with us still, aren't they? In the bad, old, wicked days (do forgive my terminology), over the course of the centuries, sometimes systems have been built up in the cause of discipleship and following the Lord Jesus. Think of the medieval system in which every man had a spiritual advisor, and he had to come and confess everything to the spiritual advisor, and the advisor told him what to do. I have myself, in recent times and recent years, been in Spain. Young converts would come to me, and they would say, 'I want to ask some questions.' And as they sat down they'd say, 'Now I want you to understand, I'll do everything you say.' Years of that method had

induced in them that attitude. That was what used to be demanded of them. Those days are, in some quarters, happily passing away, and only to arise in other quarters. For in our province there are evangelical groups nowadays that have developed a kind of a pyramid system. You have your advisor, and everything in your life is controlled by him. You must tell him everything, and he tells you what to do, and above him is another, and above him is somebody in America. They'll tell you what to do about your university and they'll tell your young daughter whether she may stay in Belfast to attend university or go somewhere else for university, and you have to obey those supposed authorities.

That's a big problem, isn't it? How do you recognise true authority? Not believing that he was the Son of God incarnate, his contemporaries would have eyed Christ to see whether his authority was of God or not and what the marks of the authority were. We can just go over it briefly, and of course, in one sense, these are the same lessons that we have already seen.

Evidence for his authority

First there were the priests. What evidence could they have that Jesus Christ was of God?

An authority that accomplishes more

Number one: he upheld their law. We could say they were in business to maintain the cleanliness of that nation and the law of God. Our Lord never once lowered the standards. He did not, I repeat, tell the leper that uncleanness did not matter, in order to curry favour with the people. He upheld the authority of God's holy Word, the authority of his laws of cleanliness.

But then he did more; he cleansed the leper. And he didn't then say to the leper, 'Now, my man, you're clean, aren't you? Now bother that old law thing; it's wasn't any good.' No, he said, 'Now, young man, you are to go back to the priests and show yourself to the priest for a testimony to them' (8:4). Because the priest would know by this action that this authority was genuine.

Now, the priest stood against uncleanness, but all he could do was to banish it. Here comes a once time leper, and Jesus has cleansed him. Well if the priest believes that uncleanness is wrong, he must believe cleanness is right, mustn't he? And if his job is to banish uncleanness, how can he object when our Lord has cleaned the man? It was our Lord's power then to make men clean. That is the number one advertisement that his power is true.

An authority that does not impose itself

Secondly, how do I know our Lord's authority is true? Well how does it work? There came this Gentile centurion, and he said, 'Lord, you just speak the word, and my servant shall be healed.' And he spoke the word, and the man was healed. But our Lord Jesus turned round to make a comment, didn't he? 'I've not found so great faith,' he said, 'no, not in Israel. And for that reason I'm telling you now that there shall come many from the east and the west, and they shall sit down in the great banquet of the coming day and the Israelites themselves will be cast out' (see 8:5-13).

'What a pity,' you say. 'And why should the Israelites be cast out?'

Well, there was Christ in their midst, and he had the authority. They didn't recognise it. They hadn't the faith. And now I want to say something very straight. He would not impose himself on them. Whether you profited from his authority or you didn't depended on your faith.

Any Calvinists here present, I respect you very much. I half-believe you, most of the week anyway. The other half of the week, I do believe what I find in Scripture: that God will never take away a man's free will, and it depends on whether a man wills to believe or not. That is the nature of true authority. And I say this. It is an extreme way of saying it, but this will provoke the Calvinists. God will leave it open to you whether you will be in his heaven or not: he will not force you. And any system of authority that turns itself into a tyranny, and forces people, is not of God. Even our Lord leaves it to the individual's faith. And, says St Paul, on another occasion as he was thinking of a very disobedient church in Corinth: 'I write these things to you, not that I am master of your faith. For by faith you stand' (see 2 Cor 1:24). The authority of Christ, on our side, always allows freedom of our faith.

An authority according to Scripture

Finally, his authority was biblical, wasn't it? Matthew says, 'Do you see him healing the crowd? That's the pattern of authority that Isaiah puts in front of you, even as it is written, "He himself carried our sickness and he bore our sorrow." That's the biblical pattern of the exercise of authority' (see 8:16–17).

Some years later, St Paul himself was hurrying on his way to Jerusalem, and he passed by Miletus, but he couldn't pass it by altogether, and he stopped there, and he called for the elders of the church from Ephesus (see Acts 20:17–35). He said, 'Gentlemen, your task is going to be very difficult, caring for the flock of God against the wolves that come from the outside and the perverse men from the inside.' How would they show their authority and maintain their authority? 'Well,' says Paul, 'I did not shrink from declaring in Ephesus the whole counsel of God' (see v. 27).

There's a temptation on the one side, isn't there, to curry favour with the people by soft peddling certain doctrines? They'll like you if you preach the easy doctrines, and they won't like you so much if you preach the hard doctrines. So soft pedal the unpopular doctrines, and you'll get support. 'No,' says Paul, 'I did not shrink from declaring the whole lot.'

Now, when he comes to the end he says, 'And now, brethren, do you mind looking at my hands? For I've left you an example. Do you know that's what the Lord said? "It's more blessed to give than receive." And I've done that. I've worked with my own hands to supply my own needs and the needs of my team and to be able to give to others, and to leave you an example, so serving and helping the weak, so that you remember the words of the Lord Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"' (see vv. 32–35). That's the pattern of biblical authority: a man who declares the whole counsel of God, and then puts his shoulder underneath the weak by his own work to carry them.

So this is the gospel of authority. Of course there is a discipline side, the path of discipleship that follows on from that. But of that we'd better talk next week.

The Path of Discipleship

Reading: Matthew 8:18-9:1

Our studies so far: Last week, we discovered that chapters 8, 9 and 10 of the Gospel by Matthew are concerned with a twin theme. On the one side they deal with the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, and on the other side they deal with our response to his authority, namely our discipleship. For, as with his authority he teaches and commands and leads us, we on our side, as his disciples, are called upon to accept that authority and follow him. For to be a disciple is to be a learner; not merely one who learns the theory and forgets to put it into practice but one who, learning the theory, then follows the Lord Jesus.

And then last week, we looked at the first group of stories in chapter 8 up to verse 17 and saw how they exhibit the Lord's authority. We grouped them under the title 'the *gospel* of authority'. So many folks feel that our Lord's authority is some stern matter; that discipleship is necessarily some arduous task to which we are called. Matthew has a better point of view. He points out that to know the authority of the Lord Jesus as one of his disciples is a veritable *gospel*, as the Lord takes his authority and power and puts his shoulder under our weaknesses and sicknesses and carries our sorrows and takes our infirmities upon himself.

The path of discipleship

Now we must take the second group of stories, to start with at any rate, and we shall find that they deal with the path, or the journey, of discipleship. For it is the fact that, if we become the disciples of the Lord Jesus and experience his power in salvation, we shall at the same time be called upon to begin a journey; for discipleship is a pathway along which we make progress and not just a once and for all experience.

Basic lessons on the path of discipleship

So we notice that verse 18 tells us that Jesus saw great multitudes about him. There were doubtless many sick folk he had already healed, and there were multitudes around him, naturally; but at this point he left them. You might at first think that it was a callous thing to do when there were scores more people around him waiting to be healed. Why did he leave them and go away? He left because there comes a point in every life when, if our Lord is going to make real disciples, then he will have to challenge each of us to begin the journey that is the path of progress for the disciple.

Therefore you notice how our Lord forced their decision upon those who wanted to be his disciples: 'He gave commandment to depart to the other side, and there came a scribe and said unto him, "I will follow you"' (vv. 18-19). And again we read: 'And when he got into a

boat, his disciples followed him' (v. 23). I suppose there were many who didn't think to do it, but those who were determined to be his disciples would not let him depart without them. They determined to follow him and came along to the quayside to get into the boat with him.

Actually, I suppose from the moment of our conversion, we're called upon to follow the Lord Jesus, as presently we shall find Matthew did. But for many of us, though we have long since trusted the Saviour, there come critical moments in life when we make up our mind to follow the Lord. It is possible for folks to be saved and know themselves saved and just stay put until some circumstance or other compels them to face this decision: 'Am I going to be a genuine, outright, practical disciple of the Lord Jesus? Am I prepared to start out on the pathway of deliberately following him?' And for those who thus follow him, there come a series of lessons, and here we have them; they are very basic lessons.

One of them is in two parts, and it's taught to men at the beginning of the journey. A couple of men come to the Lord Jesus as he is about to push off in the boat from the quayside to begin the journey, and they have to be taught certain lessons at the beginning (vv. 19–22). The next lesson comes in the middle of the journey. In the middle of the sea there arises a storm, to the tremendous fright of the apostles, and they learn their next lesson (vv. 23–27). And then there comes a lesson on the other side of the sea to complete this group of stories that are concerned with the pathway of discipleship (8:28–9:1).

Lesson one (part one): at the start of the journey (8:19–20)

What are the lessons I shall have to learn at the beginning of the pathway? There are two lessons, or at least one lesson in two parts:

A scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (see vv. 19–20)

I wonder what the Lord Jesus meant. Was this a word simply to that man who lived all those many years ago and to him only? Did he say, 'the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' to warn this man that, if he followed him in the boat, it wouldn't necessarily be very comfortable; he might have to rough it like missionaries going to various difficult places? Did he mean that, 'in this particular journey that we're taking across the lake here, you'll have to rough it'?

'Well,' you say, 'the very next story tells us that when they were in the boat, he did lay his head down on the seat and went to sleep. He had somewhere to lay his head then. So perhaps it means something more than that. Very frequently he had to sleep out in the open boat, or on the mountainside.'

Yes that is very true, and what gratitude it should induce in our hearts to remember that most nights we sleep more comfortably than God's own Son slept when he came here to earth for our salvation. But is it true that he didn't have anywhere, ever, to lay his head?

You say, 'Surely he did, because he stayed with Martha and Mary sometimes, and they gave him a bed. Perhaps it really means that he didn't have a home of his own.'

Well is he then saying to this scribe, 'Look, if you follow me on this journey, you won't have a home of your own either?' Is it wrong for believers and disciples to have a home of their own? It can't mean that, can it? It would be wrong for disciples to scrounge on other people if they could afford to work for a home of their own. Then what can it mean?

I think perhaps, if we think this thing through, we shall find that, while it is true that at times our Lord had to sleep on the mountainside because there was no room for him, and it is therefore true that we who are his followers will, at times, be called to rough it for Christ's sake, yet there is a deeper meaning than that.

He had no home of his own but, more than that, he had 'nowhere to lay his head.' When the old fox gets tired after all its daily activity, nature has provided it a place to lay its head, and it is here on the earth. The bird of heaven, when it has finished its flying around the place, has a nest. But for the Lord Jesus, where was the place to lay his head when he had finished his work? Well there was nowhere in this world, because his work wasn't ever finished.

The word is only used of our Lord Jesus once more in the New Testament, as far as I know. There was one place where he laid his head. According to the Gospel of John, he bowed his head, saying, 'It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost' (19:30 KJV). On Calvary alone was his work finished in this world and, in that sense, not until then did he lay down his head and rest. What a mission it was, when he came down to our world. It was never finished until the great work was accomplished.

We are called to follow him on the path of discipleship. It may be that sometimes we shall have very comfortable homes, or perhaps we shall not. Perhaps we shall have to rough it sometimes and, on the other hand, sometimes things will be comfortable. But as far as the work of our discipleship is concerned, as far as the lessons that we may learn and must learn on the path of discipleship, so far as the training goes that our Lord intends to give us on the path of discipleship, we shall *never* finish on this side. We shall never be able to lay down our head and say, 'Now I've finished.'

I have been guilty of many foolish misunderstandings in my time, but when I was younger and I looked upon my senior brethren with their grey beards and my senior sisters with the light and the glory already playing around their heads, I said to myself, 'Well of course they've got past all the struggles and the trials, haven't they? They've learnt it all.' And now that my hair is greyer (though the light and the glory doesn't shine around it yet) I begin to perceive that on the path of discipleship you have never finished—never—and the lessons won't get easier but tougher. You will never be in a position to lay down your head and say, 'Now that's finished; I've qualified; I've passed through; I've passed my exams, and now I've learnt it all.' No, it's not an afternoon's tea party, and it isn't a university course of three years, nor is it something we do in our youth and we've learnt it by the time we're forty. There is nowhere on earth for the disciple to lay his head, for the lessons will never be complete until we get home to glory. It's a long course.

Lesson one (part two): at the start of the journey (8:21-22)

In the second place, there came a man, and he'd got one foot over the gunnel into the boat and the other foot was still on the quay, and he said, 'Half a moment, Lord, don't cast off yet,

because I'm going to follow you, but I want first to go and bury my father, so don't go just yet. I've just got to go away and bury my father, and then I'll be back' (see vv. 21–22). That was an interesting idea, in the sense of the proportion of things. So he was going to hold the Lord up while the journey of discipleship waited for him to go off and fulfil some other duty. It's an astonishing attitude, isn't it?

I remember a Chinese man telling me once in a far off country how he couldn't become a Christian quite yet, because he was waiting for his elder brother to die. He was imbued with that tremendous Chinese sense of the importance of an elder brother. You mustn't, whatever you do, offend your father, but you certainly mustn't offend your elder brother. And because his elder brother belonged to a particular eastern religion, he couldn't be anything other than that until his elder brother died. When his elder brother had died, then he would consider becoming a Christian. What would you say to a man like that?

Of course the dear man who spoke to our Lord did not have the beginnings of a concept of who Jesus Christ is or the importance of being saved or the importance of beginning the life of discipleship. The lordship of the Lord Jesus is of such importance that, though it offended everybody in the world, I must put him first. There can be no prior claim. There can be no prior duty. We cannot say, 'Let's hold up the course of discipleship while first I do this.' It must always be the other way round: first the path of discipleship and then all the other things.

The lesson doesn't mean that Christian people should neglect their parents. If we got the idea into our heads that it was right for Christian men and women to neglect their elderly parents in the course of so-called Christian service then Matthew 15 would soon correct us. There we are told that the Pharisees had invented a doctrine that said to a young man or woman that if they liked to pretend that their money was devoted to God and to the temple, then they needn't use it to support their elderly parents. They could use it themselves later on, supposedly for the temple, but really in their own interests. Our Lord denounced it as a travesty of the will of God (see vv. 1–9).

Christian people are to support their elderly parents, difficult task though it can be sometimes; and not to do it is virtually to deny the faith. But however great a duty that is, nonetheless loyalty to the Lord Jesus comes first, for not even duty to parents will take precedence over duty to him. He demands first that we serve him, and one of the first things he'll then send us to do is to look after our parents, of course, for if we haven't learnt to show godliness at home, our supposed godliness in other spheres will not be very worthwhile.

But there was more to it than that. Not only did he teach the man that there was no prior duty, and that there is no excuse on earth for postponing the beginning of discipleship, but then he said to the good man, 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead' (v. 22). What does it mean? Well, one thing it can't mean is to let the physical dead bury their own physical dead, because the things that physically dead people can do are very limited.

Then does it mean: 'Let the spiritual dead bury the spiritual dead'? Well, you don't bury spiritual dead people, do you? It wouldn't be a very good activity to engage in. You want to waken them up and get them alive. So what can it mean? I take it that it is a pointed contrast: 'Let the spiritually dead bury their own physical dead.' And you may ponder what our Lord Jesus may have meant by that.

The commentators all disagree, like commentators do. That's what we have commentators for, so that they can disagree. Some say, 'The young gentleman wasn't just going home to a funeral service, for our Lord might have given him leave just to run away for three hours and come back again. What the young man was thinking was that he was going to hang around until his father, who wasn't yet dead, died, and when he'd buried the dear man, he would come into the money. And what the man was saying to the Lord Jesus was, "Look, I can't come now at once. I must hang on for a while until my poor old dad dies, and then I shall come into the inheritance, and that would be useful, wouldn't it, because then I could support your cause a little bit with the money I shall get?"'

There are folks who think like that, aren't there? 'Oh, I can't be too exact a disciple just at the moment, but give me another ten years and I shall have made my money at my business, and then I can start thinking about being a disciple, and I might have made enough money to help the Lord's work with.' It's a foolish way to think, isn't it? For if we each are going to be a disciple, it will mean being a disciple at our daily work, surely. If the only way we can make our money is by not being disciples for the time being, then God doesn't want the money.

But I don't suppose the young man was saying, 'Look here, Lord, you're about to go on a journey, but I've got to go home for the next six to eighteen months until my father dies, so wait here for a moment until I come back.' Surely he didn't mean for him to wait all that time. The Lord was about to go in the boat, so I presume his father was dead already, or nearly so. What did our Lord mean? Personally I take him to mean this: 'Let the dead who are spiritually dead bury their own physical dead. You come and follow me.' You see, it is the fact that people who are spiritually dead can do all sorts of useful things. There are things that only those who are spiritually alive can do.

Let me use an analogy. Suppose we have here a man who has just been run over in the street by a bus, and they take him to hospital. He has his nose broken and his ribs crushed and all sorts of other injuries, and his boots are rather muddy. Well the surgeon who comes along to clean him up won't attempt to clean the boots. No, I should think not. Anybody could clean his boots; even I could clean his boots! The surgeon, with all his years of training, isn't there to clean a man's boots. He can be doing something exceedingly more important and valuable by mending the man's heart, so he would let the non-trained, ordinary person clean his boots.

As we go through life, we shall have to choose the various tasks that present themselves before us and assign to them an order of precedence. Your unconverted neighbour could make Granny Smith down the road a bowl of porridge, of course she could. She couldn't tell her the way to heaven, could she? I'm not telling you not to make the porridge; by all means make the porridge. As disciples we shall need to put first those things that only disciples can do, for if we don't, nobody else will do them. When it comes to following the Lord Jesus, the unconverted can't do it. We can, and Christ will expect us to put those activities first that only we can do as disciples.

Lesson two: in the midst of the journey (8:23-27)

They started to go across the sea. They had got into their hearts now the importance of the path of discipleship, a task in the journey, so to speak, that, in one sense, will never be done.

It is a task that will never be finished this side of glory, and they began to understand the urgency and the supreme value and importance of it compared with all other things in life, however dear and sacred.

Nature's storms

What must they learn next? Well the disciple on the path of discipleship must now learn the relation of the Lord Jesus to the great, elemental, physical powers of the universe. They got out in the middle of the lake, and there came a storm of wind and waves that threatened to sink the boat. Our Lord was asleep in the boat, and they were alarmed and woke him, and he rose and rebuked the wind and the wave and reproached his disciples with having little faith.

Isn't it obvious that there are some lessons you can't learn unless you are actually on the journey? It's alright to look at the nice blue sea when you're sitting in the deckchair with your newspaper over your head. You won't learn much about storms there. It's thrilling to stand on the shore and see the sea itself, roiling under the mighty power of the wind, while you're safe on the shore. You wouldn't learn too much about storms watching them from there. But should you be in the middle of a journey on the sea and there comes a storm, then you'll need to learn things about the storm. The disciples learnt the relations of the Lord Jesus to the physical powers of the universe.

You say to me, 'Well I don't like the sea, and I don't go on it as much, any more than I have to. I prefer to be safe and not to do any sailing.' Is that so? But then you go sailing daily, don't you? I wonder how far you've sailed since this time last year. I'm no geographer; I forget how many millions of miles you've sailed since this time last year on an old boat called planet earth. We're sailing on this boat through space. Have you any idea of the immensity of the ocean underneath the boat? Where are you going exactly, as year-by-year you sail your boat round the sun, and the sun itself is moving through space, and you're doing a corkscrew through space all the while? And what is beneath your boat? They tell me that if you were to get your nose outside the little envelope wrapped round our planet, the powers of the universe would be absolutely lethal. We know it from what the astronauts tell us: outer space is absolutely lethal to human life.

It's a very dangerous journey to take, isn't it? And it's not only wind and waves that can suddenly upset you in this physical world but bigger and smaller things too. There are little things called germs, and there are others called viruses and runaway cells and, at any time, any one of them can assail us. Planet earth is a dangerous place to be journeying on through space. What is it all about?

Reasons for calm in the storm

It's easy to think, when the tempests come and the physical elements begin to assail us and threaten to destroy us, that something's gone wrong with the path of discipleship. But that isn't so. Our Lord was so confident that he was asleep in the middle of the storm. It wasn't anything unusual to him, for as he now demonstrated, he was in perfect control of those winds and waves, and had it been God's will that they should have drowned him to the bottom of the sea, well that's okay then. He was in control of them. And it wasn't by accident that the journey led through this storm; that was the way he'd planned it. It obviously took a lot of courage and nerve, even for those hardened fishermen, to stand in that rocking boat

with the boat shipping water and the wind tearing at the old sails and making them think it could go down any moment. It took a lot of nerve to trust that Jesus Christ was in control, but he was.

If we are to go on our path of discipleship home to glory, then this is a lesson that all of us presently must learn. What is my relation to the big, physical powers of the universe? First of all I have the assurance that neither life nor death, things present nor things to come, or height or depth or any other creature, shall be able to separate me from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (see Rom 8:38–39). In that sense I'm safe. I'm not told that there shall never come any storm. I'm not told that there is no debt. I'm not told there is no disease, no germ, no virus, no threat. What I am told is that none of these things can separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Secondly, I am told that, in all these things, I am more than a *conqueror*. Consider this for a moment. What is your relationship as a believer to the big, physical powers of this universe? Was it that God suddenly found you here on this old planet earth and said to himself, 'Well I'd better start saving these folks then'? So he saved you, and he forgave your sins and then said to himself, 'Well it's difficult; I'm sorry they're here really. This world is a funny place to be. Well I suppose I shall have to get them out of it somehow or other and avoid as many accidents as I can.' No, it wasn't that way round. You listen to what Paul tells us in Ephesians. Long before there was a planet, or a universe, God decided to have sons, not just creatures but sons of God, people who were by their own deliberate and willing faith, responding to his invitation to receive the very life of God, to be begotten of God. That was the first thing on his mind; God was determined to have *sons*.

Well how can you make a son of God? And that's an interesting thing, isn't it? You can't be born a son of God, physically. You can be born a creature of God; I was, you were, and nobody asked our permission. Nobody asked your permission whether you wanted to be born into this world a creature of God; you just woke up one day and found you were there. You woke yourself up crying or something and discovered where you were. But you can't just be born physically a child of God.

Why not? Because the process of becoming a child of God depends not only on God's power, but on your free choice of accepting it. You have to be consulted as to whether you will or not. For it's one of those things. Forgive my crude illustrations, won't you, but you can't be born married, so I understand. You can be born single (and most folks are) but you can't be born married, not in the normal sense of the term. No, this is one of those things where you have to be asked whether you will or not (apparently). And becoming a child of God is one of those things: Will you or won't you?

God wanted to have sons of God. So how do we get to that stage then? Well first of all, he'll have to make creatures, and he'll have to put them in a place where they can grow until they come to a point where he can then make his offer to them, whether they will receive the Lord Jesus and become sons of God. He'll have to put them in a place far enough away from his heaven where their choice can be genuinely free. And because he wanted to have you as a son of God one day, he made a physical universe and the wind and waves. It was never intended to be permanent; it was only a stepping-stone, but it is an inevitable stepping-stone and an unavoidable journey. You couldn't be born into heaven straightaway; it was

inevitable that we should be placed in a physical universe and have to pass through it. It is no accident that we are in this world, with all its powers that at times can be lovely and delightful with the lovely sun and the blue sea and, at other times, can scare the very life out of you.

My brother, my sister, the whole universe was made for you! It was made for you as the pathway by which you will arrive home to God. It will sometimes scare the very life out of you, but Christ stands in your boat and tells you, 'Don't be afraid', for he's master of it. And before you get to be aged ninety-six, you'll need courage to believe it.

Lesson three: on the other side of the sea (8:28-9:1)

We come now to the other side of the sea. We have learnt the lessons at the beginning, when the boat was by the quay, and now we've had the lessons that you learn in midstream. On the other side of the sea when they came out, they next had to learn our Lord's relationship, not to the physical powers of the universe, but to the spiritual powers of the universe. For though the physical powers of the universe can be terrifying sometimes, they are as nothing compared with the spiritual opposition that is raised against us.

When they would come out of the boat, they met two people possessed of demons, and Matthew is the one who tells us what the other gospel writers don't quite: 'They were so fierce that nobody was able to pass that way' (v. 28). Anybody trying to journey through there, when they met those demons, found the demons so fierce that they turned around and went back.

That's a common experience with people who set forth on the path of discipleship. They begin to make some marvellous progress, and then his satanic majesty sees to it that there is some spiritual opposition in the way. It is so fierce! And Satan tries to defy the new convert, or the serious disciple, and stop him going home. He will try to get it into his head: 'It's no good; you'd better give this up. You were silly to try to start you know. So pack up. Ignore the call of Jesus; turn tail and go back!' For ranged against us to try and stop us ever getting home to glory is all the power of hell itself. What hope have I of getting through?

What hope? Well if it were left to my strength, I'd have no hope whatsoever. But thank God that he who is Lord of wind and wave, Lord of the physical powers, is sovereign over the spiritual powers, and he cast out the opposition, and he opened the way for progress to be made. This is the pathway of discipleship, but we have one with us who is all-powerful to see us through.

The nature of his authority

We come to something that is perhaps one of the most solemn (I nearly said 'terrifying') things in all Scripture: the nature of our Lord's authority. He is master of wind and wave, master of the very deep who opens up the way to glory. Then we're told that when the local people came and saw what had happened to the pigs and the cost involved in Christ opposing Satan, they asked the Lord if he would depart, and the Lord Jesus turned around and walked away. You see, he is all-powerful, but he's no tyrant, and if man, puny man, finally says to Jesus Christ, 'Go', Christ will go. He is no tyrant.

Oh, how solemn that is. That means there will be an eternal hell. For God made this great universe, but for those who will not follow the Saviour, counting the cost as they see it, who in the end tell him to go, he'll go. Oh, but where shall you end without the Saviour?

And so we come to the end of our story. We mustn't spend so much time on all the other groups of stories, but this is Matthew on the path of discipleship and the basic lessons that every disciple is called upon to learn.

Criticisms of our Lord's Authority

Let's begin by reading from chapter 9 of Matthew's Gospel:

And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.' And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming.' But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Rise and walk"? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he then said to the paralytic—'Rise, pick up your bed and go home.' And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men. As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' But when he heard it, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.' (vv. 2–13)

God give us good understanding of his Word.

Our studies so far

On our past two evenings we have been considering together what Matthew has to tell us about discipleship. We saw that his first concern was to tell us of the authority of our Lord Jesus, so that we might then understand that authority to which we, as disciples, bow and which we follow. And so we saw three stories that help us to grasp the nature of our Lord's authority—the gospel of his authority—as he uses his authority to put his strong shoulder under our weaknesses (of whatever kind they are) to carry our weaknesses and infirmities and bear our sorrows.

Then on our second evening we found that Matthew put together another little series of stories concerned with a journey that our Lord Jesus made. He made this journey on purpose so that he might teach his would-be followers something about the path of discipleship and the lessons that can only be learned as we are prepared to follow and travel that path of discipleship with him.

Now tonight, we start another little series of three stories. They will continue the same theme, but now they will revert to the question of our Lord's authority. Once more we shall hear Matthew describe the *gospel* of his authority. We should never forget this emphasis. It is all too easy for preachers to give the impression that our Lord's authority and the question of discipleship are something terribly stern and demanding, so much so that it takes the shine off the glory and the wonder of the gospel. The very opposite is true. So now, once again, Matthew will bring us to see something of the wonder of the gospel of our Lord's authority. In these stories he will begin to introduce us to criticisms that people made of our Lord's authority and subsequently of his disciples.

Hearing and answering the critics

We shall hear people complaining that our Lord's authority was too lax. It was too easy going; it allowed people too much liberty and freedom; it wasn't strict enough, and it didn't come down on sin strongly enough. Then, if we have time, we shall even hear some believers criticising our Lord's disciples for that same reason: that discipleship was too easy going.

Authorities compared

This will help us to put the thing into focus. You may have noticed that at the beginning of each of these little groups of stories, Matthew compares our Lord and his authority with other authorities. We saw this in chapter 7: 'the multitudes were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes' (vv. 28–29). So here is our Lord, in contrast to the scribes: the Jewish authorities of biblical exposition. We also saw it in chapter 8, at the start of the second little set of stories, where our Lord is shown talking and insisting on his authority before a scribe (vv. 18–20).

Criticising his authority to forgive sins

Now as we begin this third set of stories, here come the scribes again, and the great doctors of the law. Their criticism of the Lord Jesus is vented on the occasion when a paralysed man was brought to him, and our Lord Jesus, looking at him, said, 'Your sins are forgiven' (9:2). The scribes objected to such a pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins.

Now, if we would catch the full import of this criticism and this story, we should note that scribes and Pharisees were quite used to the idea of the forgiveness of sins. They were instructed to tell the people their sins were forgiven every time the people brought their sacrifices, if they brought the sacrifices in the right way. What they are objecting to here is the authority that our Lord Jesus had to himself pronounce forgiveness of sins.

You notice he doesn't say, 'In the name of God, I forgive you.' He doesn't say, 'My son, God has forgiven you.' He just says, 'Your sins are forgiven.' And the people accuse him of blasphemy.

Oh, what a wonderful thing this is that our Lord Jesus is able to do for us! He has the authority on earth to forgive sins and to pronounce that glorious word of forgiveness. This is the *gospel* of our Lord's authority. And there are many, are there not, even in our city here, who need to hear it? They hope one day, perhaps when they arrive at heaven, that they may

discover that their sins are forgiven. Oh, how they need to know him who on earth has the authority to pronounce that our sins, all of them, have been forgiven.

His answer

But now our Lord answers his critics. How shall he answer them? How shall he demonstrate that he has the authority to forgive sins? It's easy enough for anybody to say that your sins are forgiven. How will you prove it to a critic?

So we notice what our Lord says: 'Tell me whether it's easier to say, "Your sins have been forgiven" or "Rise, take up your bed and walk"?' Isn't it delightful? He doesn't say, 'Tell me which is the *harder* thing to do?' but, 'Which is the *easier* to do?' And then to demonstrate the point that he had the authority to forgive sins, he said to the paralysed man, 'Get up and walk', and he took up his bed, and he walked. As that one time paralysed, but now forgiven, man walked straight down the street carrying his bed, he became the living evidence that our Lord Jesus has the authority to forgive sins.

My dear brothers and sisters, that's how it should be now, shouldn't it? How could I ever prove to anybody that Jesus Christ has the authority to forgive sins? Well in the first instance, if he's forgiven mine, to demonstrate that fact by my ability to walk straight. For our Lord claims not only to forgive but, as the old hymn has it, 'He breaks the power of cancelled sin | He sets the prisoner free'.³

The practical effect of free forgiveness

Here, I suspect, we should try to maintain a balance. It is the fact that it is the gospel that sets men free to walk to the glory of God. That is a fact we should never forget. Religion does not do so, even though it was the honoured religion of the Jewish law. Look, for instance, at Saul of Tarsus in his unconverted days. He was up to his eyebrows in trying to keep the law but was lacking completely this assurance of forgiveness that Christ can give. He was a bigot and a terrible persecutor, and he was that while he thought that you had to earn salvation.

Isn't that curious? While he still thought you had to earn salvation by your works, he was a terrible bigot and a persecutor and a blasphemer and a cruel man. It was when he discovered that salvation is not by works and that you can have forgiveness free and for nothing that he was turned around. He didn't persecute anybody after that, ever, and instead bore persecution and suffering and loss himself so that he might bring the message of the gospel to others. It was this gospel of forgiveness in the name and authority of the risen Christ that broke the power of sin in Paul's life and began to set him free. He tells us in the Epistle to the Romans how our Lord empowered him to walk. He's far from claiming that the day he got converted he walked absolutely perfectly thereafter and didn't put a foot wrong; far from it. He's the man that bemoans the fact, 'Oh, wretched man that I am' (Rom 7:24). Nonetheless, he does communicate to us the fact that our risen Lord has power not only to forgive but to set people free. We rejoice in the wonders that the gospel has done, whether it

³ Charles Wesley (1707–88), 'O for a thousand tongues to sing', 1739.

be the Huaorani tribespeople, having discovered free forgiveness and the marvel of what that forgiveness does in a society of that sort,⁴ or for a Saul of Tarsus.

When we've noticed that, let us then notice that we who profess to have received this forgiveness should give attention to that power that our Lord has to make us walk straight. For, if we appear not to walk straight, the world will come to question the authority of Christ to forgive sin.

Matthew's own testimony

So Matthew now (what a happy man he must have been) is able to write one little paragraph consisting of one verse that further illustrates this point that Christ has power to make a man walk straight (9:9). He tells us that he was sitting at the tax booth, a hated collector of taxes, making his living by an occupation that was obnoxious to the Jews, first on the grounds that he was collecting taxes for the hated forces of occupation; he was a kind of a quisling in the eyes of many a Jew. Secondly, he was obnoxious to them because in this trade so many tax gatherers cheated the people; they made much more money than they should and swindled a lot of others. Therefore, in this time, the tax collectors were excommunicated from the synagogue.

And here was Matthew, chained by his love of money to his tax inspector's desk. (Isn't it good that tax inspectors now are altogether a better breed?) There he was when our Lord walked by and said, 'Follow me', and that power was broken. The love of money was gone, and he walked free and never went back again; it was a genuine conversion.

Criticising his engagement with sinners

Let us notice the sequel. Matthew was modest enough to not tell us it was he who did it. Other gospels will tell you Matthew (or Levi, which was his other name) next made this great banquet for a lot of other tax gatherers and sinners. Matthew just says that Christ happened to be in the house. Well it was Matthew's house of course, because he wasn't without a penny or two. And on this occasion, when he threw this dinner party as a way of introducing people to Christ, you should have seen the equivalent of Rolls-Royces lined up outside the door! There were a lot of tax gatherers there, and there was a tremendous amount of criticism: 'Why does your Lord eat with tax gatherers and sinners?' (v. 11). The people gathered together where our Lord sat at dinner were a very doubtful lot, and therefore the strict Pharisees of the time criticised the Lord Jesus for what he did. Do notice, how our Lord replies.

His answer

You notice first of all what Matthew was doing. He himself had *left* his unlawful way of making a living, but though he had left it himself and no longer practiced it, he had a heart of concern for the men he had known in his daily job. And the question was: how did you bring

⁴ The gospel reached the Hourani tribe in Ecuador through the work of missionaries in the 1950s, including the five who were martyred by members of that tribe: Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Pete Fleming and Nate Saint.

the gospel to them? You couldn't bring them to the synagogue. The whole lot were excommunicated. And to bring them to the synagogue would have been difficult anyway, wouldn't it? It would have appeared as though the Christians were mocking the serious discipline of the synagogue and telling the world it didn't matter how you behaved, and you should accept everybody along in the synagogue, like some advanced clerics now and again hold services in St Paul's Cathedral for a cast of disgustingly immoral players. To bring that crowd of men into a synagogue would surely have been a very serious mistake.

The world needs to know that Christians stand against sin and against social sin and every other kind of sin. The gospel doesn't say it doesn't matter how you behave socially. But that's only one side of the story. These men were sinners and rotters, the lot of them. How did you get the gospel to them? And Matthew didn't intend to bring them to the synagogue; he made a dinner party in his own home and brought the Saviour along. What a lovely thing it is. How often a meeting in a home is more appropriate than trying to get sinners even into gospel halls or other church buildings (though get as many there as you can).

Our Lord answered the criticism of the Pharisees: 'They that are well have no need of a physician, but they that are sick' (v. 12). Of course, if somebody's got the smallpox, you don't send your teenage daughter to look after them, because that could be a very risky thing to do, but somebody will have to go and look after them or else they'll perish. And if the medic isn't prepared to go where the victim of smallpox is, then that person will die. Likewise it isn't always the wisest of things to send a young convert into the midst of certain types of sinners, but if nobody goes and sits where they sit and offer them friendship, how shall they hear the gospel?

Then our Lord Jesus reminded his critics of what God really prefers. These same good critics were assiduous in offering their sacrifices to God. They didn't take the trouble to find out before they started what God really prefers. He's not against sacrifices but, over and above and beyond sacrifices, he would prefer mercy, for that is what God is like. He is the great God of authority, as he is interpreted through our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. The authority of God that condemns sin prefers mercy to our sacrifices.

So then here again is the gospel of authority, this time as we see it at work in the attempt to reach out to save sinners. We see its message of forgiveness of sins, its power to set the sinner free and to enable him to walk straight, and what it will ask of the converted sinner: to go and seek other sinners and, with the authority of the Lord, to bring the Saviour to meet them and them to meet the Saviour.

Of course, it's not the last time that evangelicals have been criticised by what you might call the high church. When Spurgeon preached in the Crystal Palace there were those who thought this was the extreme of ungodliness. Imagine holding meetings in a place that wasn't consecrated! So did the Pharisees feel about our Lord. But it isn't only folks who have had no experience of the Saviour who will sometimes criticise our Lord's discipline. For now look what happens; the next series of stories begins with a further criticism.

The criticism from John's disciples

There came the disciples of John. Now they were believers. As you noticed, they didn't join the Pharisees in criticising the disciples for going among the unconverted and bringing them

to Christ. What they did criticise our Lord for was that he appeared to be too easy on his converts once he'd got them converted. The disciples of John said, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?' (v. 14). In other words, the disciples of John felt our Lord let his own disciples off too lightly. And perhaps anybody can get converts if you're not prepared to insist on the rigour. If you make it a little bit easy, well you'll get more converts, won't you? John made his converts fast. Why didn't Christ make his converts fast?

How interesting it is how many people of differing kinds thought our Lord Jesus was too easy going. We shall find presently that isn't true. He wasn't as easy going as some people think, but for the moment, his answer to that criticism is as follows.

The first part of his answer

First of all, why should you fast? Why would you fast at all? For instance, he said, 'For can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is still with them?' It would be an odd thing to do, wouldn't it? I don't often make it a habit of going to weddings, but for most I've been to it would be decidedly odd if all the guests refused to eat anything on the wedding day while the bridegroom and the bride were still there. What an odd thing, quite inappropriate, you say. Yes, for fasting isn't a thing to be done just for the sake of doing it. Fasting, to be any good, has got to be done appropriately in appropriate circumstances and for adequate reasons. Just doing it for the sake of doing it is useless.

So what is it then that's going to determine whether they fast or not? Our Lord indicated that it's a question of his own presence or absence: 'Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is still with them? Of course they can't, but the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them and then they will fast' (v. 15). And the end of that sentence indicates that our Lord is now using the thing as an analogy and a parable.

Let's start with the apostles. If they had the Lord Jesus actually with them and all the joy of his company, how would they fast? There would come the days when he would be taken away, and the sense of his absence and the sorrow of it would give them occasion to fast and, I suspect (I don't know, but I suspect), we may apply it to ourselves. You take a man who's just found the Lord, and he's heard the Lord's word of forgiveness: 'Son, your sins have been forgiven.' And he feels like jumping for joy and throwing his hat up into the air and saying, 'Hallelujah for Jesus!' or some other such remark. What would be the sense of trying to make him fast in that moment? The sense of the Lord's presence and the joy of forgiveness is filling the man's heart; it would be nonsense to try and make him fast.

You will know from your long years of Christian experience that the whole of Christian life isn't like that. There will come moments when the Lord seems to be a long way off, and then fasting can be appropriate. Notice I said it *can* be. Even so, it's not always appropriate. It depends what the cause of the sorrow is. And if the cause of the sorrow is being over-worked, please don't go fasting.

When Elijah got very down-hearted through excessive over-work and ran away from Jezebel (anybody would do that I suspect) and lay down, exhausted, in the desert, he prayed that God would take away his life. He felt so bad, the last thing on earth that God allowed

him to do was to fast. He sent an angel with his breakfast and told him to take an extra day or two in bed; he fed him well to get him over his exhaustion (see 1 Kings 19).

But there do come times where a sense of the Lord's absence and the problems of his work will naturally call the believers to fast. And fasting isn't just going without a little sugar and a few hot cross buns either. Fasting is going without not only food but otherwise legitimate things for the sake of the Lord and his work.

The second part of his answer

Then our Lord gave another reason why: 'No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made' (v. 16). Here's a field where the ladies are expert and I'm not, but as I understand it, if you get a piece of unshrunk cloth, it wouldn't do to mend a patch on your trousers by trying to sew that over, because the one bit will pull away from the other, and it'll make it worse.

Similarly, if you've got new wine you put it into new bottles, that is, in wineskins. In the ancient world, when a skin was new, it was pliable. Then when you (not you perhaps, but other folks) put new wine into the new skin, and the new wine fermented and was pushing all over the place, the skin would give a bit and stretch but still hold the wine in, and so you preserved both the skin and the wine. But if you tried to put new wine into an old leather bottle, the old leather had gone as hard as anything and had no give in it, and the new wine just burst out (see v. 17).

Our Lord is talking about new converts when he talks about new wine and new, raw bits of rag. (Excuse the metaphors if there are any new converts here, won't you? But they're ones the Lord used.) We must take the spiritual discipline for these folks, bearing in mind their spiritual state, mustn't we? It's alright for some of us old folks like myself and some others here who have got old and leathery with the years and settled down to disciplines that are grave and, I hope, mature and dignified. But there's not necessarily a lot of give left in me. You get the young convert, bubbling over with joy, unspeakable and full of glory at the forgiveness of his sins; he'll need some discipline. He'll need a skin, so to speak, to contain the old wine, but he'll need a skin that's got a little give in it, and that will bring him back again. Allow for the giving, and you shall keep him and the skin.

And how could Judaism cope with the converts of Christianity? Well, Judaism was never made to contain that kind of joy. They did have some joy in the Old Testament but not the kind of joy that Christians know. It was a good discipline, but the exuberance of the presence of the Messiah among his people, bodily among them, announcing forgiveness of such extent and greatness that they'd never known before, was too much, and the old disciplines of Judaism couldn't begin to cope with it. You needed a new skin, a new discipline. As we read it, we perceive how down to earth, sensible, practical and understanding of the human heart our blessed Lord is.

Asking the Lord to follow us (9:18-26)

I wonder, have you noticed how Matthew tells you this story? While he was still speaking these things to the disciples of John, who thought he was terribly lax because he didn't make his disciples fast and wasn't rigorous enough in his discipline, there came a ruler who said

that his daughter was already dead. Would Jesus come and lay his hands on her? And he went, and as he went there came a woman, and she had an issue of blood.

Now what does this tell us? Well, the man was a ruler of a synagogue, holding a responsible position there. He had a daughter who was twelve years old. She was as dead as dead could be. What good is your fasting now? What good is all of your discipline now? You can have all the rules of discipline in the world like the Pharisees had, but if the young folks in your synagogue are dead, what do you do about that? Getting them to fast then wouldn't make much sense.

And do you notice we're on a journey once more? That's interesting, isn't it? That's what happened to us the first time we got interested in the succession of three stories and presently, before we knew where we were, we were off on a journey into the deeper experiences of the path of discipleship. Now we've come back and we've been talking theological theory and practical evangelism and now, before we know what's happening, we're off on a journey again, following our Lord to meet cases of deeper need and sometimes need that you didn't even know was there.

They criticised him for not making his disciples fast. They said he made life too easy. But wait a minute, there was a deeper problem with the ruler of the synagogue himself: a young person was dead. What next? Well, there was also a woman who, according to the Jewish understanding, brought defilement wherever she went, through her hidden weakness that she could not master. Surely the events are parables.

What's the good of a synagogue full of dead young people? You'll need to do something more than fasting to get rid of that; and that our Lord now does. He gives the girl life! Do you know, that situation is possible for us as Christian churches, isn't it?

Then, talking about this woman who had a hidden weakness and carried defilement wherever she went, just let me remind you of what it says in Hebrews: '... lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled' (12:15).

What about my hidden weaknesses of envy and jealousy and revenge and spite? What about my hidden unsoundness in doctrine, in attitude to the world and in goodness knows what, that wherever I go spreads defilement among the people of the Lord without me being aware? This is what the path of discipleship will mean, for me as for these two people. Jairus came, and the woman came, knowing their weaknesses, and asked and urged the Lord to follow.

Thus does he invite us tonight. Do you have a weakness? I may have a hidden weakness you don't know anything about, and beneath my refined exterior it would spread defilement of gossip, of malice, of envy, of character assassination. Oh, sometimes we can't stop gossiping, can we? By doing it we spread defilement. Our Lord waits for us now to come and ask him to follow us while we take him to where the weakness is. This is advanced discipleship.

The two blind men

When he'd dealt with those two cases, there came a couple of blind men, and they followed him into the house. They came crying after him, but for some reason our Lord didn't take any

notice (or didn't appear to). So the blind men followed him and eventually came to the house into which he'd entered, and he gave them their sight (see vv. 27–31).

Tell me, is that not also a parable for us, spiritually? What's the good of a synagogue full of folks who are blind? We could apply it at all levels, couldn't we? You could preach to a congregation, and when you quote John 3, they don't have the first notion what it means and can't see anything in it. What about us believers? Paul used to pray for his converts that the eyes of their heart would be illuminated, that they might know what is the hope of his calling, what is the exceeding riches of his inheritance in the saints and what is his power towards us (see Eph 1:18–19). If my eyes are closed to that kind of thing, and I know nothing of such illumination and the Lord's purposes in my life, what use is it all? It will be a funny, dead congregation, won't it?

There were these blind men, but they didn't get what they asked for the first time they asked, so they went down the road. You just imagine. They heard his voice, they followed him, they cried out, but he made no reply. Then suddenly the voice went silent, and they didn't know where he'd gone. He tested their determination to follow him, didn't he?

There are some things in the spiritual life, such as that illumination of which I speak, that you won't necessarily get the first time you ask for them, for these are spiritual gifts that demand in us the intention to persevere and keep on asking and keep on following. 'If you continue in my word, then you shall be my disciples indeed,' said our Lord, 'and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free' (see John 8:31–32).

The final stage

Then we come to the final stage on this little journey of ever deepening experience of discipleship. They brought to him a man who was mute. Well I can tell you, a way of making a synagogue a very dull place is where everybody's mute. It will also make a prayer meeting dull and the Lord's Supper dull, and it will be a sorry thing for the gospel if I'm mute and can't speak to anybody about the Saviour at appropriate levels. What can our Lord do about that? They brought him the man who was mute, and he cast out the evil spirit and set the man free.

Muteness is a strange complaint, isn't it, and I speak with feeling for those who are physically mute. It's not their fault, but it is an exceedingly frustrating thing to be, for God made man to speak. The human ability to speak is one of the most marvellous things in the universe. Animals have a few noises. They can't, many of them, manage to say much. In man, creation becomes articulate. In man, creation is able to speak back to its Creator. And oh, what a wonderful thing that is, however humble the man or woman, to be a creature of God with that tremendous gift of being able to talk back to the Creator. Yes, and this man was mute. What a frustration, both for God and for man. And he made us to show forth his praise. We haven't all to be preachers, have we? But he made us to set us free to talk to him and then to talk out his praise.

Am I mute? Well, on the further reaches of the pathway of discipleship, the Lord shows us that he can cope with our weaknesses, be they deafness or defilement or blindness or muteness. This is what the real thing is about! It's not just a few rules and regulations.

The Lord bless his Word.

Delegated Authority

Let's read some portions from the Gospel of Matthew, beginning in chapter 9 and then reading on into chapter 10:

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (9:35–10:6)

As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. (vv. 12–15)

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. 'A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.' (vv. 23–24)

Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. (vv. 40–42)

God give us good understanding of his Word.

Our studies so far: Already we have spent three sessions together, considering the twin topics of the authority of our Lord Jesus and its corollary: the discipleship of his people. In the early stages we enjoyed learning again some of those elementary lessons that every disciple learns about the nature of our Lord Jesus' authority and how it is his authority that brings us salvation. But then we observed that those who will bow to that authority and become his disciples are asked to follow him along the path of discipleship. And, as in our imaginations we trod that path with his early disciples, we found it led us into deeper and deeper experiences until, as we saw last time, the Lord Jesus was expecting us to bring him into the very inmost parts of our lives, as individuals and as churches, that he might deal with those deep-seated and hidden weaknesses and diseases that mar our spiritual life and need his correcting power.

Authority delegated to make disciples

Perhaps you might think, 'Well that's the end of it. Now, when we have followed the Lord Jesus along the path of discipleship into those deeper experiences of his salvation, well that's all then, surely?' No, that isn't quite all, for the path of discipleship is not finished. When we have followed the Lord into the deeper levels of his salvation of us, there waits yet another division of this lesson, and still further mileage on the road. For if, as disciples, we have learned of the Lord's power in our own lives, then he will expect us, as his disciples, to go out and tell other people of our Lord and his salvation.

So it is that here in chapter 10, after having taught his disciples what it means to be a disciple and the glorious wealth of his salvation, our Lord now gathers them together and commissions them to go out and to preach that gospel to other people and to make disciples of them. It is an interesting order, isn't it? It is not that, first of all, we learn to take the gospel to others and then, eventually, we qualify until we become profound teachers of God's word. It is the other way round. If we have truly learned the lessons of discipleship and the further reaches of discipleship, then the next advanced lesson will be that we in turn must go out to make disciples of others. We are falling short in our discipleship if we do not go out and try to make disciples of others.

Therefore here we are told that our Lord called his twelve disciples together and for this purpose: for their task of making disciples of others, he delegated to them his authority. Of course here, in the first place, he is talking of the famous apostles, the famous twelve disciples, and they had divine authority delegated to them to an extent we never shall. Nevertheless, I fancy we may learn the lesson for, if we are going to be effective at our level in making disciples of others, we shall only do it as we discover what it means to have the authority of the Lord Jesus delegated to us.

The nature of the authority he delegates

If we're going to have his authority delegated to us, perhaps we'd better first of all observe the nature of that authority. There have not been lacking priests and prelates, evangelists and popes, who got it into their head that they are equipped with tremendous authority, and they have turned themselves into spiritual tyrants. That wouldn't do, would it, if it happened to

us? What is the nature of this authority that Christ will delegate to his people to exercise in bringing others into salvation and the path of discipleship?

The condition of the people

The introductory verses tell us that when our Lord saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were distressed and scattered, like sheep. They were frightened by this and frightened by that and, like sheep will when they're worried, they were scattering all over the place and not knowing where they were going. How many people there are like that: distressed, frightened, having no certain hope or sure destiny and worried about this and worried about the other? Instead of making calm progress down the path of discipleship to a well-defined goal, they are scattered all over the place.

It is true of course of the unbeliever. We were 'as sheep going astray'. What a marvellous thing salvation was for us, when we returned to 'the Shepherd and the Overseer of our souls' who guides us in life and looks over (that is, 'inspects', or 'is the foreman of') our souls (see 1 Pet 2:25). He is guiding us as how to spend them and how to direct them for their maximum profitability.

It can happen to the Lord's people that we get scattered and distressed. If you notice, in some of the Epistles, not least those that Peter wrote, people can become distressed by false doctrines and absurd and bizarre notions and quarrelling and strife, or have their faith assaulted by grievous and perplexing suffering.

Let me get it into my heart that, if I'm going to be someone who helps disciples, it isn't a question of domineering; it is a question of rallying, of giving enough pasture so the sheep goes to it, and giving it a sense of security so it loses some of its distracting fears and isn't so worried, and then giving it a sense of direction and that confidence that there is green pasture up ahead.

Problems of interpretation in Matthew 10

Now we get down to the details of chapter 10. It is a chapter that's not very often read. Let's notice why it isn't, because it's a difficult chapter; there are some problems in its interpretation. Now I'm going to vex you, I hope not distress you, by mentioning some of the problems that beset us when we read this chapter.

Warnings of persecution

Here is our Lord Jesus, and he is briefing his apostles. He's about to send them out on missionary journeys around Palestine, and then they're going to come back to him and report all that they have done. We know from other passages in the gospels that these twelve went out and they preached and they healed, and then they came back to the Lord Jesus triumphantly telling him what they'd done and how much they'd enjoyed it. It's a marvellous thing to see folks when they've been out on some venture for the Lord, and the Lord has blessed them. There's no other joy on earth like it, and they come back with great glee! Of course they do. That is how the disciples came back. Oh, what those who never venture anything in the work of the Lord miss.

As you listen to our Lord Jesus briefing these men, you will find that he says a lot of things which, as far as we know, they never did suffer in all that missionary journey. He warns them that they're going to experience persecution, for instance. And the question arises then: why did he warn them of the persecution that they in fact didn't suffer anyway? Let's repeat that and get it into our focus, so we understand it:

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (vv. 5-6)

Why did he tell them that? You'll notice at once how very different this is from the commission he gave them after he rose from the dead. Matthew himself records in chapter 28 that after the Lord Jesus rose from the dead and assembled his disciples to the mountain, he told them that time, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit' (v. 19). They were to go to the very ends of the earth after he rose from the dead, but not on this occasion. On this occasion, on this missionary journey that they accomplished while our Lord was still on earth and before he died, they were strictly forbidden to go to the Gentiles. They were simply to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel: no more, no less. You say, 'Well then, Mr Preacher, why are you bothering us with that tonight, because it doesn't apply to us?' Well more of that soon. It was the mission that they went on before the Lord Jesus died.

Now here comes the problem. Why then does he tell them what he does in chapter 10?

Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles' (vv. 17-18)

Why did he warn them of that? There is not the slightest evidence that on that first missionary journey they were persecuted in that fashion, or brought before any courts. We read nothing of it. As far as we know it didn't happen, and that kind of thing didn't happen, as far as we know, until after the resurrection when they were commanded to go to the Gentiles and were brought before the counsels of the Jews and beaten very often, and sometimes stoned to death, and brought before the counsels of the Gentiles and similarly persecuted. Why then did he tell them about that persecution?

Before the Son of Man returns

Look at another curious thing. When he says that they're going to find persecution of that sort, he tells them:

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (v. 23)

But then, on their first missionary journey, they went out and came back, and of course the Lord hadn't gone, let alone come again. How do you put it all together?

There are some critics who say that Matthew has simply got it all wrong, that he's got it all muddled up, and he's put a lot of verses from here and some more verses from there and

taken some other verses from somewhere else and put them all together and made an Irish stew of it. But of course he hasn't.

Three 'trulys'

So first of all, let us notice what the Lord Jesus is doing. And I want you to notice three verses to start with in particular:

Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. (v. 15)

This is the first 'truly' (or 'verily' in some translations). The second is:

for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (v. 23)

And the third truly is:

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. (v. 42)

Let's look at these three verses that help us to take our bearings. It is always important to notice what our Lord says, but when he prefixes what he says with his solemn word 'amen' ('truly' or 'verily') then we must pay special attention and be prepared to get hold of it with both hands. It means 'this is blessedly true', 'it is solemnly true', and we are to take hold of it. We remember how important it was for us and our salvation when we heard him say, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life' (John 5:24). And, like drowning men and women, we caught hold of it and staked our eternity upon it, because he said, 'Truly'. Now as disciples going out to preach his word in a hostile world and with a very difficult task, here are three other 'trulys' that we shall need to get hold of and grasp for dear life if we are going to do our task efficiently as disciples taking the word of God to others.

Then notice these three verses. They not only have the 'truly' in common, they have something else in common. Each of these verses points us off to the great coming day of the Lord's second coming and the judgment that then shall follow. As we read: 'Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town', immediately our minds are taken off right into the coming future, when the Lord shall come and reign and, eventually, sit upon the great white throne and execute judgment. 'Truly' here indicated the reality of that coming day of judgment.

The second occurrence of truly says, 'You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel until the Son of Man comes.' This indicates the reality of the second coming of Christ. And the final truly again concerns his second coming and, praise God, the day of reward! If we have only given a cup of cold water, 'truly' we shall not lose our reward.

If we are going to be efficient as disciples taking his word to the world, then we shall have to take hold of these three great 'trulys' and keep our eye on that coming time, the judgment

and its solemn effects. They speak of the wonder and certainty of the Lord's second coming and the glory and encouragement of the day of reward.

And you will say to me, 'But those apostles went out on their journey, and they went round Palestine, and they came back and told the Lord the things they'd done, but, they were miles off the Lord's second coming and the day of judgment. They went out and came back and still the day of reward hadn't come.'

Never mind. For all I know, you'll go out and come back on all your many journeys of preaching the gospel, and you'll come back at ninety-three-and-a-half, and still the Lord won't have come. What difference does that make? I'll tell you something else. If you haven't kept in mind the fact that he's coming and preached in the light of it, and if you haven't kept clearly in mind the fact of the coming and the eternal judgment and preached in the light of it, if you haven't kept in mind the coming day of reward and worked for the sake of it, then there will have been something missing in your preaching.

He gave them authority, and one element in the authority with which they preached was this: they preached as men who stood on the edge of the second coming. They preached as men who stood on the edge of the final judgment. They preached as men who stood on the edge of the day of reward. And it was real to them and hence the authority that marked their preaching. Alas how Christendom has lost its nerve over some of these things. Let's ponder them together until they burn into our hearts, for it's a blessed thing to serve the Lord, but it's something more than an afternoon tea party.

The first truly: provision and responsibility

Let's think for a moment about the first division, the first truly.

What no longer applies

We ought just to notice that there are some things that he told them here that no longer apply to anybody. He says to them, 'Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics nor sandals nor a staff, for the labourer deserves his food' (v. 9).

On this occasion when they went out, they were not to worry about supplies, money or finance. How would they finance their gospel campaign? Well they needn't worry, because whatever town they arrived at, they could expect to be put up. Why? Well because they were coming as the servants of Messiah, and they were coming to Israel in the name of Israel's king.

I'll tell you something about the King of Israel, our blessed Lord. Before he was rejected and crucified, if he wanted to mount a gospel campaign or something in your town and you had a donkey and he wanted it, he just sent down the road for it. You'd find a couple of chaps at your gate, loosening the donkey from its tethering. If you went over and said, 'Hey, what are you going to do with that, that's my donkey?' they might say, 'Oh, sorry, *the Lord* has need of him', and that would be the end of it. The Messiah would commandeer it. You can't do that nowadays. You can't walk down to Belfast City Hall and see a nice Rolls-Royce out there with 'Belfast 1' or something on its registration plate, and a flag, and decide you need that because that would do very well for your gospel mission. You can't just go inside and say, 'The Lord needs this; I'm going off with it just for the moment, and I'll bring it back

again.' No, and please don't expect to. Why can't you? Well our Lord tells the reason when finally he countermanded these instructions. The passage is Luke 22:

And he said to them, 'When I sent you out with no money bag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?' They said, 'Nothing.' He said to them, 'But now let the one who has a money bag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: "And he was numbered with the transgressors." For what is written about me has its fulfilment.' (vv. 35-37)

He is now countermanding the previous instructions. Now they are to take a purse; now they will have to pay their own way, and they must not expect the nation to support them. Why not? What has made the difference? Why, because the king himself has been outlawed: 'He was reckoned with the outlaws' (see Isa 53:12, Luke 22:37). And if the nation has officially outlawed the king, then the king's messengers can no longer expect the nation to support them. And what a weak and miserable thing it is when Christians ask the world to pay for Christians' gospel campaigns.

Of course, it still stands for those who do acknowledge the king. Do you acknowledge the king? Well he still has a right to come and get your donkey, Daimler or bicycle or whatever it is, for he's a king.

What still applies

Let's come to our 'truly', for at least the basic principle remains. He said,

And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. (vv. 14-15)

What a solemn thing that is. They must get into their heads the eternal implications of their message and what it will mean for anybody to reject it. It is solemn to preach a word like that, isn't it? But notice something more. He didn't say, 'Whoever shall not receive me, or refuses to hear my words, it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that man.' He says 'Whoever doesn't receive *you*, nor hear *your* words . . .' The judgment of that man will make the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah look small in comparison. And we'd better pause there because that's tremendous and could easily be distorted, could it not?

Who am I, and what is my word? Could it possibly be true that the eternal destiny of that man walking down the street depends on my word, on what he does with my word? Well just a moment. First of all, our Lord was talking about twelve apostles, and I'm sure it must be a much more serious thing for somebody to reject the word of an apostle than it is to reject my word. My words might be wrong sometimes; the apostles were inspired. There's a big difference. I have to remember that I could be mistaken in things I say.

I'm not an inspired apostle, and therefore you have the liberty and the right to disagree, at least to criticise, what I say, remembering what Paul said about prophets: 'let two or three prophets prophecy, and let the others criticise' (see 1 Cor 14:29). We all know those people, don't we? They get up to say something about a passage that has perplexed learned and

godly men for centuries, and they'll say, 'This is a difficult verse.' (Well we all knew that. I've got about half a dozen different commentaries on it on my shelves, let alone the ones on yours.) 'This is a very difficult verse,' they say, 'but I prayed about it, and the Lord has shown me . . .' Well there's nothing you can say about that then, is there? That's the end of the conversation.

My good brother, if the Lord has shown you, you won't need to say so. It will become apparent as you expound the verse.

We must make due allowance, therefore; we must not take this and exaggerate it out of its context. To reject an apostle is to reject the Lord Jesus as, lower down the chapter, our Lord says, 'He that receives you, receives me. He that rejects you, rejects me' (v. 40). You don't reject what St Paul says without rejecting the Saviour: 'If any man thinks himself to be spiritual, let him acknowledge the things that I write,' says St Paul, 'are the commandments of the Lord' (1 Cor 14:37). Oh, where shall we get in the path of discipleship if we allow ourselves the attitude, nowadays more prevalent than ever, that says 'that was only Paul who said that'? 'He that rejects you,' says the Saviour, 'rejects me.'

There is a sense in which it applies to even us humble creatures, and how awesome the responsibility is. The authority doesn't rest in me, or you either; it rests in the Lord, but he delegates us the authority. The authority is not in my word in itself; it's in his word, but he gives me to speak the word, and his word becomes my word. If I go and speak the gospel to somebody, that is a solemn thing, because if he rejects it . . .

Just you imagine the final judgment for a moment. Have you thought of it?

Here comes Mrs Crombie before the great white throne, and her sins are read out. Then the Lamb's Book of Life is opened. Her name is not in the book. Why not? She protests that her judgment isn't fair.

'Oh,' says the Judge, 'but you knew, my good woman. You did know, didn't you?'

'When did I know?'

'Well, do you remember that morning you were hanging out the linen? And over the garden fence your neighbour, Mrs Smith, told you that you needed to be saved and quoted you John 3:16. Do you remember that?'

And then, I don't know by what divine mechanism, but the memory will be flashed back again, and as clear as it could be, Mrs Crombie sees that garden scene again and herself standing there.

And was that you on the other side of the fence talking to her? And she heard what you'd said. She knew she needed to be saved, and she rejected it. She wouldn't have it, and she went inside and slammed the door! And because she rejected your word, she's lost.

It's a solemn thing, isn't it? Do you really believe that? Well if you don't there isn't a lot of good preaching Scripture. Therein is its authority.

The second truly: persecution

Then we come to the matter of persecution, the second 'truly'. Perhaps this is a difficult one to understand, and we should allow room for difference of opinion as to what our Lord meant, but this at least is how it appeals to me. He guides his apostles now as to what they are to do when they meet persecution: 'If they persecute you in one city, flee to the next one'

(v. 23). It is wise advice. In their loyalty to the Saviour, they might have said to themselves, 'Well, no, we won't flee. We won't run away. We'll stay put, and we'll weather the storm.' And you could have commended their courage, but our Lord has different advice. He says, 'When they persecute you in one city, flee to the next one.'

Why?

'Well, gentlemen,' he is saying, 'I'm sure you won't have time to complete the lot anyway, before the second coming; don't stay unduly long in one place.'

You'll find if you read the Acts of the Apostles that Paul followed that method. Of course he had to sometimes. If you got stoned nearly to death in one city you didn't always go back into it; you went to the next one. But that's how the gospel spread. For the Lord is coming again, and it's a big, big world, isn't it? Do we sometimes settle down too long in one place? Oh, well of course, you know, some things can't move, can they? If you have an elderly parent to look after, you can't move. If you're an elder in a church with responsibilities, you can't move. How many of our dear brothers and sisters in Russia are being persecuted and would like to leave and can't?

Of course we mustn't take the thing out of its context, nor exaggerate it beyond what was intended. Here our Lord was not talking to all his people; he was talking to his specially appointed apostles upon whom the evangelization of the world would, in the first place, depend. But, within that context, it seems to me a thing we must not forget. We haven't all the time there is. If the door doesn't open here, having been kicked and pushed many times, or if they throw you out, well it's a big world and there's somewhere else to go. And the Lord is coming! It would be good if everybody had the chance to hear the gospel once before the Lord came, wouldn't it?

It is good to keep up the regular preaching of the gospel at seven o'clock of a Sunday night, of course it is. But I have known some folks to hesitate in their hearts and say, 'You know, I made this special effort to go over to Timbuktu and preach the gospel, and I went there. Do you know, I went there four Sundays on end and nobody got saved?' And they thought it was a waste of money, and people said, 'Oh, no good came of it either.' And when they talk like that I say to myself, 'Hmm, and they preached this last fifty-two Sundays in the gospel hall. How many folks got saved there?' But they didn't give that up. It's curious, isn't it?

God give us a good sense of proportion and help us to remember that the Lord Jesus is coming. He expects us to cover the maximum amount of ground possible. For we do believe the Lord is coming, don't we? He might come before our work is finished.

The third truly: rewards

We come to the final truly: 'truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward' (v. 42). There are some people who tell us that we should serve the Lord without looking for reward. What marvellously spiritual people they are, and I'm delighted to hear that they can keep going with undiminished puff and zeal without any prospect of reward. They have a little unrealistic idea, however, because there's one standing in front of you who, if it weren't for the reward, might have given up a long while ago. And in his mercy, the Lord encourages us

with reward, and if he holds out the reward I'm not quite sure that it is too spiritual to say to him, 'No, I don't want it,' for he holds it out.

What a lovely antidote there is here to that feeling that comes to us all from time to time: 'Well I'm not much good. And what can I do anyway? I shall never get a very big reward.' Don't you be so sure of that. You could have a prophet's reward if you wanted it, couldn't you? I should think that might be sizeable. I think I should be happy to get a prophet's reward. I think it's unlikely, but I should be happy to.

'Well how do you get that?'

Well you get it in one of two ways: either by being a prophet or, from time to time, looking after a prophet. Whoever receives a prophet (that is, into his home) in the name of a prophet so as to be a partaker of his work, receives the reward that the prophet gets (see v. 41). 'And if it were only a cup of cold water,' says our Lord, using a very vivid example, 'you'll not lose your reward' (v. 42). Tap water is pretty abundant, most times in the year at any rate. If you can get a reward for tap water, I think I've got a bit more than tap water I could bring to bear upon the need, if it wasn't for myself, then for somebody else. For I've noticed preachers get thirsty, and if supplying the water for them (like some good soul has done for me tonight; he's going to get a reward) then I could do that at least. But then how much do I believe it?

And you may ask, 'Will this reward lead to an eternal difference?' Why, do you suppose the rewards are only temporary then? We toil for a crown that is eternally imperishable (1 Cor 9:25).

Our Lord gives his apostles these three trulys as he sends them out to preach. Each of them relates to the second coming: the judgment, the second coming and the day of rewards. That's the background against which we preach. We must preach as though we stood on the very brink of it.

Persecution

Seeing you look so patient tonight we'll consider one final thing, one other dimension our Lord puts before his apostles. At great length he mentions to them the persecution. Well now, as we have seen, they didn't get persecuted the first time. They went out, and it all was glorious, and they came back very excited, particularly about the demons being subject to them, and the Lord had to quieten the excitement down a bit.

So they didn't get any persecution that time. Why did he bother to tell them about persecution? Well for one good reason: they got it the next time, and it was serious.

We aren't under much persecution now, are we, not for preaching the gospel? So you say, 'The verses are irrelevant to me then.' Are you sure you'll never get any persecution? What should happen if England went very much to the left? Persecution is the norm. Our years of peace are the abnormal in the history of the church. Look what dear old Wesley went through for the sake of the word of God.

There's another reason why I should interest myself in these verses about persecution. It will be evident to us if we know anything about our brothers and sisters behind the Iron Curtain. When persecution comes, it sharpens up our sense of reality and proportion,

because it really makes you face the issue: 'Now is what I preach real? Is it real enough that I would give my life for it, or is it only a game?'

You say, 'I'm so glad we don't live in times of persecution, so I don't have to make that decision.'

Oh, my dear good brother and sister, then are you fit to preach? Sometimes I tremble, because I've preached too much, and the preaching is easy. What if I were to be put to the test of whether I would seal with my blood what I have so glibly preached? And even if I go home to heaven without any persecution, oh, pray God that he would bring into my life that sense of proportion and reality so that even now I live with that same zeal and sense of proportion as my brethren are forced to have who live in the countries where persecution is inevitable. A disciple can't be above his master, can he? All he can hope for is to be as his master. What happened to your master when he preached? It's extraordinary, isn't it, if it hasn't happened to us?

'Don't you be afraid to speak,' says our Lord. 'Don't you try to hide it' (see vv. 26–28).

Why not?

Because it can't be hidden. You think you're going to save your life by hiding your message? Well sooner or later it will be proclaimed from the housetops. You might as well let everybody know, for it will come out sooner or later.

You say, 'It might cost me my life to do it.'

Well it might. That is the point, you see, it might.

'Oh,' you say, 'I thought that God is so kind he looks after the birds. Won't he look after me? He wouldn't let me suffer or die, would he, because doesn't he look after birds?'

Well yes, he looks after birds, but our Lord says, 'Haven't you observed that some birds fall and die?' (and the cat gets some of them). 'And I'm telling you,' says Christ, 'that not one of them falls without your Father' (see v. 29–31).

My dear brother, my sister, God doesn't promise to protect you endlessly from persecution, nor me either. What he does say is that he values us more than many birds, and you'll never fall unless he allows it and is with you in it. But you might fall.

It's a serious matter we're involved in, isn't it? 'Confess me before men,' says Christ, 'and I will confess you before my Father, but deny me before men, and I shall deny you before my Father' (vv. 32–33). It's as serious as that. How easy to say the words, like Peter did. I mustn't forget Peter, who said he would never deny the Lord. But when they're putting the old thumbscrews on, or tearing out your fingernails, that's another matter, but then that's the battle to which we're called.

Let's thank God if we're not in times of persecution now; I would be the worst coward, and I hope I shall never be in any such times. But don't let me allow the fact that I'm not suffering persecution to make me easy going, as though my Christian work were a simple hobby that I do when I feel like it; and if I don't feel like it, I don't do it. For we are in the battle, the war of the ages, and eternal things hang upon what we do and say for the Saviour. This is the path of discipleship, and God give us the grace to follow our Lord closely, until the path leads us home to glory.

Strategies of the Kingdom

Now let's read some selected passages from the Gospel by Matthew, chapters 11–13:

When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.' (11:1–6)

Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope.'⁵ (12:13–21)

He put another parable before them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."' (13:24–30)

⁵ KJV—'And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.'

He told them another parable. 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.' (v. 33)

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (vv. 44–46)

God give us good understanding of his holy Word.

The theme of the fourth section of Matthew

In the past sessions we have been considering together the third section of the Gospel by Matthew and found it to be concerned with the twin themes of the authority of our Lord and our response to him as his disciples. Now we move on to the fourth major section of this Gospel. We shall soon perceive what theme it deals with if we pay heed to the first story that opens the section.

We notice in passing the little introductory word that when Christ had finished commanding his twelve disciples, 'he departed from there to teach and preach in their cities' (11:1). And you may say, 'But surely Christ was forever teaching and preaching?' And that is perfectly true, but Matthew wants particularly to stress that fact at this juncture, because he is presently going to lay it down as one of the master strategies of the Lord Jesus in this present age. It is this upon which his apostles and disciples will be called to concentrate, just as the master strategy of the Messiah will similarly be to teach and to preach. It is, after all, this fourth section of Matthew in which Matthew includes that famous and strategic parable we call the parable of the Sower. It stands in the prime position when the Messiah announces his strategy for this present age. The sower went forth to sow. The seed he sows is the word of God. He sows it by teaching and preaching (see 13:1–23). So let us notice that as we pass and tuck it under our caps, and we shall come back to it in a moment.

The strategy questioned

With that we come to the first major story of this section of the gospel, and it is the story of how John the Baptist heard in prison about the works of the Messiah and sent his disciples with a puzzled question: 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' Why did John the Baptist ever ask such a question?

The question of doubt in a believer

On the surface it looks quite clear, as though the man in prison were having his doubts about the person of Jesus. Was he, after all, the Messiah? At least, was he the Messiah that they had been given to expect from their reading of the Old Testament? But of course, John the Baptist was a very famous prophet. Indeed, as our Lord presently says, 'Of all men born of women there was none greater than John the Baptist' (see 11:11). He was the greatest of all the Prophets, because to him was given the sacred and elevated charge of being the forerunner to

Messiah himself. And therefore many believers have felt a little bit nervous at the idea that John the Baptist ever came to doubt whether Jesus was really the Messiah. But then of course, there are many believers who feel that doubt is a very bad thing and something, which if it ever happens to you, you should do your best to keep in the dark. I don't know what you have found; I have found over the years there are many believers who, if you can really get close enough to them, have very serious doubts in their hearts and often doubt matters of their own personal salvation and are scared stiff to let anybody know it, lest they would be thought to be terrible people and forthwith cast out of the synagogue, so to speak. Or, if they have doubts about their salvation they wonder if that would disqualify them from being saved and, therefore, they keep their doubts suppressed with a great deal of consequent misery.

So let us, at this level, get this matter straight. If we have doubts, then let us be open and honest about them with the Lord. It has been my good fortune, having been saved, I wouldn't like to tell you how many years, by God's good grace, to have never doubted my salvation. It's none of my cleverness either. I have doubted many times whether there is anything true in Christianity at all. Yes, if Christianity is true, I'm saved, but is Christianity true? And is it objectively true, or have I managed simply to play a psychological trick upon myself? How do I know it's true?

Well if you have never had any doubts of any kind, you qualify for a special blessing this evening that our Lord sums up, as the older translations put it: 'Blessed is he, whosoever shall find none occasion of stumbling in me' (v. 6 RV). Yes, you're a happy Christian indeed if you can sing that hymn that all congregations sing so lustily (whether truthfully or not, I don't know): 'He is not a disappointment'.⁶ That is, you've never been disappointed, never found any problem, never had anything to trip up over in Christ and his gospel, and very blessed you are indeed. But know this, that many people have had, and do have, doubts and not only doubting Thomas either.

The Lord answers doubts

And you will observe on every occasion where people have doubts that our blessed Lord, instead of rejecting them, encourages them. He might chide them for having unnecessary doubts, but he always solves those doubts for them by giving them that kind of evidence that is necessary to resolve the doubt.

Permit a grey head to turn aside to a little exhortation. If we have doubts, let's do with them what John the Baptist did with them: let's tell the Lord honestly about them. Some people have emotional doubts, some people go through patches of difficult health and nervous problems and have doubts, and some folks come to universities or colleges and meet the full blast of atheism or agnosticism and develop intellectual doubts, and a miserable experience it can be. Of course there are people who hide behind their doubts and love them, and the last thing on earth they'd want to do is to give up their doubts, because as long as they've got doubts, then they can go and engage in all sorts of sinful and worldly practices and use their doubts as an excuse, but that's a different story altogether. The genuine believer finds doubt a miserable thing and vastly unsettling, and the first thing to do with it is not to

⁶ Anonymous, 'He is not a disappointment'.

suppress it, or try and hide it, but to do what John the Baptist did and take it to the Lord and say, 'Lord, I've got these doubts. Now, please, Lord (for that is your job really), supply me in your good time with the evidence that will banish the doubts.'

An alternative interpretation

You say, 'Mr Preacher, you're still taking it for granted that John the Baptist doubted and you oughtn't to do that.'

Oh, I'm sorry. I was forgetting I oughtn't to do that. Of course he didn't doubt, not the man who stood and said to the crowd, 'Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29); the preacher who baptised the Lord Jesus. Just imagine the privilege of baptising the Lord Jesus and being the preacher who stood and saw the Holy Spirit descend as a dove upon him.

You say, 'It's impossible the man had doubts.'

I get it then, it was impossible; so what was he doing then?

Perhaps you'll have a better reason, and I haven't heard of it. The only alternative explanation I've ever heard runs as follows. John the Baptist knew full well that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, only Jesus wasn't advertising it well enough. Indeed, as we have read in these verses when he healed people he told them, curiously enough, not to make it known that he was the Messiah. Therefore John felt that something must be done about this, because the world did need to know that Jesus was the Messiah, and so he hit upon a little ruse.

He waited until he could be sure that there would be a vast throng about the person of the Lord Jesus, and then he sent some disciples of his who would come upon the Lord Jesus while the great crowd was there, and put the leading question to the Lord Jesus: 'Are you, or are you not, the Messiah?' And of course the Lord would have to answer it, and all the people would hear what he said: 'Yes, I'm the Messiah.'

Are you sure that means that John wasn't doubting?

'Well,' you say, 'he didn't doubt that Jesus was the Messiah.'

No, but he doubted whether our Lord was going about it quite the right way and whether our Lord was dragging his heels, as we say, and not getting on with the job of telling the world that he was the Messiah. And so John the Baptist thought he'd better put a hand in and get the Lord to act a bit more quickly. That, my good friends, is, of course, doubt. He would be saying the Lord wasn't doing it the right way and wasn't acting soon enough. I don't know about you, but it seems to me a common cause of doubt amongst believers that when we pray, God doesn't always answer our prayers soon enough.

So anyway, John sent these messengers, and we should notice the Lord didn't rebuke them, or John either. What did he do? He sent him evidence.

Matthew's reason for John's doubts

Why do you suppose John got upset then? I think I can give you a better reason. I think Matthew gives us a better reason. He says, 'It came to pass when John heard in prison the works of the Messiah, then he sent the messengers' (11:2). I imagine things sound different in

prison from how they sound outside. Why was he in prison anyway? Matthew will subsequently tell us in chapter 14 what the situation was.

Injustice in the prison

John had come preaching as the Messiah's forerunner, and he had boldly proclaimed to the nation that Messiah would do two things. He would baptise with the Holy Spirit, that is to say, he would bring life and salvation to men, but he had preached that the Messiah would do another thing: he would baptise with fire, and he would truly and thoroughly purge his threshing floor and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (3:11–12). Messiah would bring life to the repentant; he would bring the fire of God's judgment upon the impenitent.

As John looked around he saw a lot of those who professed to repent, and he baptised them; but then, as he looked around he saw a lot that looked uncommonly like chaff, ready to be burnt. He looked around in fact and saw Herod, living in sin with his brother's wife and setting the whole nation this terrible example. In the name of the coming Messiah, John the Baptist pushed his fist into the face of Herod and called upon the man publicly to repent. King or no king, he called on him to repent. He called on him to repent in the name of the coming Messiah whose forerunner John was, for the Messiah was coming, and if Herod didn't repent, Herod would be among the chaff that the Messiah would burn up with unquenchable fire. Herod didn't like the preaching; it wasn't to his wife's taste. So Herod added this to all his other sins, and he put John in prison.

Now that was a solemn thing to do, wasn't it? If John the Baptist was in fact the forerunner of the Messiah, by putting John in prison, Herod was challenging the Messiah himself to do anything about it. So John sat in his prison with his bowl of water and plate of dry bread. And what do you suppose John was thinking and praying? If he was thinking and praying anything it was, 'Well, Lord, hurry up please; you'll now have to deal with Herod. It's not a question of personal spite or revenge upon Herod, but here am I, John the Baptist, your official forerunner, and I have declared before the whole nation, before this guilty king and his queen, in your name, that he must repent, and if not you'll deal with him. And he's put me in prison and defied you. You must vindicate your name, Messiah, and of course you will, won't you? That's what you've come to do.'

There came some footsteps down the passage. You could hear them. John said, 'That'll be an angel come!' (Whether angel's feet make any noise, I don't know.) 'Perhaps that will be Messiah himself coming down to let me out.' But it wasn't; it was just a man with the bread and water. Well where had Messiah got to then, and when was he going to act? Then he heard the works of the Messiah. So Messiah was going around the countryside, but why wasn't he letting John out of prison and establishing the fact that he was Messiah by dealing with deliberate, hostile evil? Messiah didn't come. And as the weeks and months dragged by, doubt began to nestle in John the Baptist's heart: 'How can Jesus be the Messiah if he doesn't deal with evil?'

That of course is a very big question. Perhaps we who have led sheltered lives sometimes do not feel the force of it. It used to be said in the war, 'If your Jesus is God, why doesn't he stop the Germans, the bombers, the slaughter?'

You could say, 'But Jesus saved my soul.'

‘Well that’s good stuff. He has, if he is the Son of God, but if he’s the Son of God, then why doesn’t he deal with evil? Why does he allow brutal men to go in and slaughter women and children wholesale? Why does he allow oppression? Why does he allow the wicked to prosper in politics, in business or wherever? Does he care for justice?’

What is more, the Old Testament said quite plainly that John the Baptist was certainly right: that when Messiah came, he would judge evil. Here was Jesus, and he appeared to be making no attempt to put down either evil or wicked men. And of course one day, John heard other footsteps coming down the corridor to the prison, and the key was put in the door. Perhaps at last this was the Messiah then! The old lock creaked and the door opened, but it wasn’t Messiah; it was a soldier with a sword, and presently John’s head was on the charger to be brought upstairs to the banquet. And, my, didn’t Herod’s queen laugh! ‘That’s what’s come of your preaching!’ And Messiah did nothing. How on earth can he be the Messiah?

Iniquity in the synagogue

You will notice a similar problem (if not so dramatic) that we read in chapter 12. Our Lord was in a synagogue on a Sabbath day. Now these people weren’t iniquitous like Herod, were they? But he was in a synagogue on a Sabbath day, and he healed a man’s withered hand. The Pharisees were so incensed that they took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. What did Jesus do when faced with evil in the most sacred place, with the very representatives of Satan opposing the word and work of God in a synagogue? Did he thoroughly purge his threshing floor and burn up this chaff? No, he just turned round meekly and walked out. How can he be the Messiah then? Or was he the Messiah?

The answer Jesus gives

Let’s begin to hear his answer, first to John.

Scripture fulfilled

He did a lot of miracles, and then he said to the messengers of John: ‘Go and tell John the things which you do hear and see, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good tidings preached to them’ (see 11:4–6). And what was that meant to convey? Why, it was this: as John sat in his gloomy prison and went back in his mind over the great promises of the things that Messiah would do when he came, here were some of the things being done that Isaiah had preached. Jesus was doing some of the positive things that Isaiah said Messiah would do. He wasn’t doing nothing. There were people with broken hearts that he healed. There were the dead that he raised up. The deaf heard, the blind saw, and the gospel was being preached as it had never been preached before! Something was being done, and certain Old Testament Scriptures were being fulfilled. Let that satisfy John for the moment.

Now just a practical point. You’ve got doubts. Well, that’s too bad, but you don’t doubt everything I suppose. The thing you’ve got doubts about, well, let it be, but please do remember the things about which there’s no doubt whatsoever! Hang onto the bits you can

believe, the bits that have been demonstrated, while you wait for the further answers to the bits that you as yet can't see the answer to.

So our Lord was positively preaching the gospel, bringing sinners to repentance, spreading forgiveness and the love of God. The dead were raised; the deaf were hearing. These are all signs of the Messiah, the delightful, positive, healing gospel evidence of the Messiah.

'Ah,' you say, 'but what about this problem of evil?'

Judgment kept waiting

On that side, we begin to find our Lord's answer in the words that Matthew recalls to us. For when our Lord was faced with the Pharisees in the synagogue, and they took counsel to destroy him and he simply turned round meekly and walked out, Matthew gives us a poke in the ribs: 'How about that?' he says. 'Do you perceive that now Messiah is doing exactly what Isaiah said he would do?'

Well what's that?

'Well, he should not cry aloud, neither should his voice be heard in the street. A bruised reed: he would not execute judgment on it and smash it. A smoking flax: he would not execute judgment on it and put it out. He would tolerate both *until* he should send forth judgment unto victory' (see 12:19–20). Of course Isaiah was writing as a Jew, and Matthew is writing as a Jew. There was this to be said, that at the time our Lord Jesus was on earth, the vast masses of the Gentiles had never heard of him, and Isaiah had said quite plainly that it was God's good programme that judgment would not come until the great masses of the Gentiles had had the opportunity to hear. And so he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles, 'And in his name shall the Gentiles trust' (v. 21 KJV). He shall not break the bruised reed, and he shall not quench the smoking flax *until* he brought forth judgment unto victory.

Now watch how that theme is developed.

The strategy adopted

According to Isaiah there's going to be what you might call an 'until' period in Messiah's operations. Consistent with that, in chapter 13 our Lord begins to preach his parables by the seaside, and eventually he takes the disciples into a house and explains the meaning of the parables, and there arises a very interesting thing. He talks in parables so that the others shouldn't understand. You say, 'That's a very funny thing to do, isn't it? Why does he talk in parables? Why didn't he want everybody to understand?'

One of the answers is that he wasn't talking the gospel; he was talking the mysteries and secrets of the kingdom. He was talking strategy; he was talking tactics with his disciples. What were Messiah's tactics going to be for the setting up of his kingdom? What were Messiah's tactics going to be for the preaching of the gospel and the putting down of evil? How would it be done?

Well Peter had a notion as to how it should be done, and it stayed in his head quite a long while. There were some evil chaps around! There was the local income tax man who swindled all the farmers around about the place, the rotter in tow with the Romans, a virtual quisling. There were a few of them around about the place. Then there were these hated

Romans, the imperialists. Peter, like a good many other Jews, and his fellow apostle Simon who was a zealot (that is a right-wing activist in politics), or had been until he got converted; they knew how they thought God was going to deal with evil. It would be like he'd done with the Maccabees and quite simple really. Messiah would come; you would raise an enormous army; you would sharpen your swords, and you'd go round and every evil man you caught, you'd cut his head off. Simple, isn't it? And when you'd got rid of all the evil men, well life would be a paradise. And they expected Messiah to do it.

There are a lot of folks who have the idea now that's the way to do it, be they extreme right or extreme left. They have such a simple idea of the world that all you've got to do to get paradise is to get your sword or atomic bomb out, whichever is more convenient, and eliminate the wicked. Then it would be a lovely world for you and me to live in, which implies of course that you and I are not wicked. We're not part of the problem, are we? It's the others who are the bad lot. That's what the communists think of the conservatives. The curious thing is, the conservatives think it of the communists. And you've only got to think a moment to see what an absurdly childish idea it is that the great problem of evil in God's universe could be solved by getting out a sword or two and cutting off one thousand heads or more.

You know better anyway, even if the world doesn't. If Messiah had there and then taken out his sword and cut off all the heads of all evil people, how many people would have been left? If Messiah nowadays cut off the heads of evil people, would yours stay still on your shoulders? You who believe the gospel sometimes have been heard to say you were worthy of execution. Indeed if Messiah had risen up and executed the wrath of God, there wouldn't have been man, woman or child left, 'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23). Some other way will have to be found, won't it, for coping with evil, for my sake at least and for yours? How will Messiah go about dealing with the problem of evil? He announces to his apostles what his major strategy is going to be.

The sower and the kingdom

He's going to set up the kingdom; he's going to start right now and not leave it until some future date. How is he going to set it up—by a sword or by ten thousand swords? No, indeed not, he is going to set it up by a sower: 'Behold, a sower went forth to sow . . .' (13:3). This is the word of the kingdom. Messiah is going to set up his kingdom by teaching and preaching the word of the kingdom, bringing it to bear upon men's consciences and giving men the chance with their free will to make their response of 'repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus' (see Acts 20:21).

That's how he proposes to set up the kingdom of God, and he himself began it. He went around preaching and teaching and, ever since, he has sent out his apostles with that same strategy. What does our Lord say at the end of Matthew? What is his final word to his church? 'Go and make disciples!' (28:19). And what are his final words to his people in the Gospel of Mark? 'Go and preach!' (16:15). What are his final words in the Gospel by Luke? 'Thus it is written that the gospel should be preached to all the nations beginning from Jerusalem' (24:46–47). And what does he say in the Gospel of John? 'As my Father sent me, I send you' (20:21). You are to go and preach. This is the Messiah's main concern.

How would you set up a kingdom unless you bring men and women out of their ungodliness, out of their rebellion, to bow the knee of repentance and to be reconciled to God? It's no good dressing up the enemy in Christian clothes unless they repent, is it? So the sower must go out and sow, and men must be given the chance to repent and become sons of the kingdom. That again, as you will now perceive, is going to take some time.

The wheat and the tares

So our Lord told us a second parable, this one about how a man sowed wheat in his field. And when he'd sowed wheat, the enemy came along and sowed tares (or weeds). Presently when they both began to grow, and it became obvious that there were some tares around, the servants came to their master and said, 'Do you want us to root out the tares?'

And he said, 'No, but let both grow *until* [there's going to be an 'until' period then] harvest' (13:28–29). And when shall harvest be? Presently he told them: 'It shall be the end of the age' (v. 39). Oh, yes, he's not denying that judgment will come; there will come judgment, there will come the furnace of fire. The wicked shall be gathered up into their bundles and cast into the furnace (vv. 41–42). The dragnet will be pulled to the shore, the fish sorted out and the bad fish thrown away (vv. 47–50). Yes, judgment will come, but not just yet. There must first be that 'until' period, and the tares and wheat grow together until the harvest, and the harvest is the end of the age.

A matter of free will

Do please consider another thing. Who sowed those tares? You say, 'His satanic majesty.' That highlights a problem, doesn't it? Why didn't God get rid of him the moment he sinned? What a lot of trouble God could have spared himself if the moment Satan had sinned God had destroyed him. Why didn't he? And if he's overlooked it until now, what about suggesting it now? The earth isn't going to be at peace until he's put of the way. Why doesn't God deal with Satan? It's not only for his own sake, for Satan is always fooling around and putting tares in the wheat and persecuting Christians and making life difficult for you.

But you see, this matter of evil does raise problems. When God made Adam in the garden, we are told that God put him in the garden and pointed out that there they might eat of all the trees that they'd like to eat of, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told them, 'You won't eat of that, for in the day you eat of that you'll die' (Gen 2:17). But do you know what that implies? The very fact that God said, 'No, don't eat of that tree,' implied that they could eat of it if they decided to, which shows us a very interesting fact. When God made us, he made us with the ability to sin, didn't he? God tells you, 'Don't do this,' and you and I find ourselves quite free to do it if we make up our minds to. There's no sort of chain, no prison house; we can do it. That is another way of saying God made us with a free will. Consider only what it means if God gives us a free will. He gives us a genuine choice, not like Mr Ford is reputed to have done, when he told people they could have any colour car they liked, so long as they chose black. God isn't like that. He gives you a genuine free will, and if you use it to sin against him, he will allow you to sin; because if he gave you a free will and then every time you were about to do a sin he stopped you, you wouldn't have a free will, would you? And if God is going to give people a free will, then he must give them

choice and time to develop that choice in. That means also that when he offers them salvation, that must be free as well.

You just imagine a situation in which you could say in this gospel hall of a Sunday night when you got to the appropriate point, 'Now I've an offer to make to you. If you will trust Christ tonight, from now on you will suffer nothing. The devil himself will be restrained. You will never suffer illness. You will never suffer persecution. You will never suffer any pain. You'll never suffer any financial want. Only trust Christ tonight, and all your troubles will then be immediately over!' You would have them queuing up, wouldn't you?

Would that be faith, do you suppose, or cupboard love? No, the reality is that if faith is going to be genuine and repentance is going to be genuine, then when a man or woman receives the Saviour in repentance and faith, God must still allow Satan to get at his work to try them, as he tried Job, to see whether the faith is genuine. That will show whether we trust in God for what we get out of it, or whether the repentance and the faith are genuine, and we shall stay by our decision to believe, whatever happens. That's the only kind of faith worth having, and to grow such a faith in this ungodly world means God has got to let us have time, and he's got to grow his wheat in a world where Satan is allowed to do his work.

The leaven

Matthew has further emphasised the theme of the interim period in the parable of the leaven: 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal *until* the whole was leavened' (13:33). And if we wanted another Old Testament Scripture to put alongside the ones we've been considering, there's one ready to hand at the end of Matthew's Gospel (22:44). It is that great cardinal timetable Scripture of the Old Testament, which says what the programme was going to be for Messiah: 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand [that's the ascension of our blessed Lord] *until* I make your enemies the footstool of your feet' (Ps 110:1).

Yes, there's judgment coming. Do please notice, the thing was said in the Old Testament; it remains true in the New. The Old Testament said there'd got to be a period between the ascension and the coming again in judgment.

Not yet

Why didn't he get John out of prison? It was because he was not proposing to execute judgment at that stage. The awful day of the Lord was not yet come. He read in Nazareth that delightful passage and said, 'This day, is it fulfilled in your ears' (Luke 4:21). What is fulfilled in your ears? It was 'the acceptable year of the Lord' (4:19, cf. Isa 61:2). Then he closed the book. But the very next statement was, '. . . and the day of vengeance of our God'. That hasn't come yet, thank God. There is the 'until' period in between. That solves the problem at the intellectual level, doesn't it? It gives an answer for our heads. It's no good being disappointed with Christ for not putting down evil if he didn't intend to put down evil at that point. We see how it was necessary for the gospel to have the 'until' period. We are assured and promised that one day the judgment will come.

An answer for our hearts

It's alright knowing the theory, isn't it? You try to get to sleep on a prison floor, filthy and dirty and damp, with a little straw. You'll want more than an answer for your head. You'll want an answer for your heart. So our Lord said, 'Do you know what it's like, this great kingdom that Messiah is putting up? It's like a man who found a treasure in a field, and he went and bought the whole field to get the treasure. That was his sense of value' (see 13:44). Do you know how Messiah looks on his kingdom? Well I can tell you. I can tell you even more than that; I can tell you some of the detail that makes up the treasure. Some of the various bits and pieces of it are in front of me here: golden candlesticks and beautiful oil lamps and all these other things that sit before me here that go to make up the great treasure of Messiah's kingdom. I can tell you something about how he looks at the treasure that is his kingdom. He said he bought the whole world to get the treasure. The whole of this vast universe is there so that God might get his people, this treasure. That treasure is at the moment hidden in a field, isn't it?

I read *The Times* this morning and, though I don't read every word, do you know, I couldn't find anything about the gospel meetings in this place or how many souls have been saved recently up in Donegal. There wasn't a word about it in *The Times*. There were all sorts of things about strikes and Mrs Thatcher (she manages to get in quite regularly I notice) and there was the sport and how many goals had been kicked here and kicked there, and how the shares have done on the market. And you'd have thought that these were the important things in the world. What a nonsense it is; you know that's only the manure that makes the grass grow.

Do you know what the world is really about? The world is really about the salvation of your soul and the soul of the person next to you, the growing of wheat for God's garden, the amassing of the treasure for the Father's treasury above. The world goes on and knows nothing about it. They think that their affairs are the big affairs, when they're only the field. The real significance and value is the great treasure that God has hidden in that field. If you understand how the Lord views it, it's like the pearl so magnificent that when at last he came across it, he sold all he had and bought it (vv. 45-46).

Wouldn't you have loved to have been there with John, as he was sitting on that jail floor wondering why Messiah doesn't come to vindicate him and prove him right against that woman up there, aloft in the palace?

'Has the Messiah forgotten me?'

Oh, how you would have loved to tell him, 'John, just think how Messiah values you. One day he shall sell everything he has at Calvary's cross and buy you. Hold on a bit longer, John, for you matter to him.'

Herein is the patience and the faith of the saints, that we dare trust the Messiah in the days of persecution and suffering until the necessary suffering be past and the Lord come again, and we be taken home to heaven.

Learning about the Son

Let's begin to read in the Gospel of Matthew:

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom than for you.' At that time Jesus declared, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' (11:20-30)

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand towards his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.' (12:46-50)

It will take very little observation for us to notice that, in the first passage, we are introduced to the unique Son: 'no one knows the Father except the Son. All things are delivered into his hand.' And in the second passage we are introduced to the model Son who does the will of his Father who is in heaven, and all who do that will along with him, he counts as his mother, brother and sister.

Revisiting the issue of John's doubts

Last week we were thinking together of John the Baptist in prison and how our blessed Lord comforted and stabilised that man in the time of his grievous doubt. He did not rebuke him for having the doubt but supplied to John the evidence that he so sorely needed in those

hours and days when, as a result of his imprisonment and his disappointment in the Lord Jesus, his faith began to wobble. Now let us go on to notice first of all, very briefly, our Lord's treatment of the crowd when the messengers of John had departed.

Two kinds of doubt

We have noticed that for John, in his doubt, there was comfort; there was evidence; there was consolation. For the crowd, in their doubts, there was nothing but stinging rebuke. For there are two kinds of doubt, aren't there? There is the doubt of the honest heart that is puzzled and disappointed because Christ does not seem to come up to his expectations. And there is the other kind that is the dishonest doubt of people hiding behind their doubts and criticisms because they don't really want to believe. Now for a moment, therefore, let us think about that crowd to whom our Lord addressed his remarks.

Awkward questions (11:7–15)

These were the multitudes who, when John the Baptist had been preaching on the banks of Jordan and baptising, had gone out to him in their thousands and had made a great show and a great splash as they had got themselves baptised by him. Now, a year or so later, they didn't quite want to know and were very embarrassed and had all sorts of doubts that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Some of them had violent criticisms, both of John for being a man (as they put it) who had a demon, and of our Lord, because (as they saw it) he was a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners (see 11:18–19). And our Lord begins to deal with them:

Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see?' (v. 7)

Well that was an embarrassing question to ask to start with.

'Tell me,' he said, 'I believe now I'm right in saying, am I not, that about a year-and-two-months ago, some of you went out into the wilderness, didn't you? I think quite a lot of you went out into the wilderness. Tell me, exactly what was it you went out into the wilderness to see? I mean, obviously people don't just go out into the wilderness in their thousands for nothing. You went out to see something, didn't you? I know what: you went out into the wilderness to see a reed shaken by the wind, didn't you?'

Well that won't quite do. Whatever man in his senses went out into the wilderness to see reeds shaken by the wind? You might see millions of them, and who would go to see a reed anyway? I mean that won't do; of course not.

'But you went out into the wilderness, didn't you? You must have gone for something. I know what: you went out to see a man clothed in fine raiment, didn't you?'

Well no, hardly. I mean, those who wear fine raiment are in kings' palaces, and you wouldn't expect to find a man in royal robes out in the middle of a waste-howling wilderness, of course not.

'Ah, I see. So you didn't go out for that, but you did go out. You must have had some reason for going out into the wilderness in your thousands. What was it?'

It was embarrassing now to remind them, wasn't it?

'You went out to see a prophet, didn't you? Yes, and I say unto you, more than a prophet. You went out because you heard of that voice crying in the wilderness: "Prepare you the way of the Lord; make his path straight", and your hearts were moved and your consciences were searched. Could this really be what Isaiah had prophesied in his fortieth chapter? And you went out to listen to him and, as you heard John thundering out his appeal on the basis of God's moral law and calling on you to repent, your consciences were stirred, weren't they? And some of you got yourselves baptised. You had a right to be stirred, for I say unto you, of all the prophets that have ever arisen, there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist. Indeed, if you will have it, this is the Elijah that, according to Malachi 4, was to come' (see 11:14).

Revealing answers (vv. 16–19)

Yes, they had gone up, and what had gone on since? Why hadn't they gone on and believed in the Lord Jesus, if they thought that John was the forerunner? For John had pointed to the Lord Jesus, and they had professed to be moved by John; but they were not prepared to believe in Jesus.

'Ah, well,' they say to him, 'in the end we came to the conclusion that John was mad, had a demon.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Well, look at the way he dressed,' they said. 'Dressed up in that odd gear in the middle of a desert; I mean to say, camels' hair! And listen to him shouting at the top of his voice about hell, damnation and the lake of fire and calling people vipers and things! The man must be off his head.'

'Oh, I see. That's why you haven't gone and professed faith in the Saviour. That's why, in spite of those experiences when your conscience was moved, and you professed repentance, and you were going to get ready for the coming of the Messiah, now it's all gone. That's your excuse, is it? You don't like preaching about hell and judgment and sins and repentance. You think that's all a little bit unbalanced. What would you like? Perhaps you'd prefer nice preaching, all full of the love of God and forgiveness of sins?'

The Son of Man came eating and drinking. How lovely were the words he preached: 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved' (John 3:17). And when they heard him, did they respond with excitement? Did they say, 'This is it, isn't it? This is it! We didn't like that old damnation, hell fire, preaching stuff; that was crude. But no, this love of God idea is marvellous. Do you know what? You can have eternal life, and you can have it free and for nothing, and "God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten Son". Isn't it marvellous? Now this is the stuff we like.'

No they didn't.

They didn't like John the Baptist because he preached hell fire. They said he was a little bit emotionally disturbed and had a demon. They didn't like Jesus Christ either. They said he was loose and he was lax and he was a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. 'He's been with that lot, and he's got the cheek to tell us some of them have been saved, if you please. What effrontery to us, and we've been religious all our lives. Then, to make matters

worse, they say they're sure of salvation; and then there's us, serving God all through the years, and he never gave us so much as a bit of assurance. We don't like it, this nasty, little evangelicalism and people being, what does he call it, "born again"?"

So they wouldn't have John with his preaching of wrath, and they wouldn't have Jesus with his preaching that he was the Messiah. And now, over these long centuries, perhaps we begin to see what lay at the back of their doubts.

They couldn't see that Jesus was the Son of God. Couldn't they? Why couldn't they see it? Our blessed Lord, with the infinite skill of the divine medical practitioner, diagnoses their hearts. He said, 'You're like a lot of children. You'll neither have it one way, nor have it the other way. You'll neither have the mourning nor the dancing (see vv. 16–17). You just want a nice little religion that will be respectable; you're neither interested in repentance nor salvation. You won't have it either way.'

Reaching the right diagnosis

Doubt is a thing that has to be properly diagnosed. If in our personal work we would help people who are in doubt about the person of Christ, then we shall be wise to seek the Lord's wisdom to diagnose why they've got the doubts. If they have real, genuine doubts then the answer to that is more evidence. Sometimes people can have doubts that are not real doubts but merely a screen for a determination not to repent of their sin and not to believe the gospel.

The judgment that is now

We also talked last week about our Lord's answer to John's problem, which was the problem of evil. If Jesus was the Messiah, why didn't he deal with evil? Interestingly enough, this week I had another Jew tell me the very same thing: 'Your Jesus can't be Messiah,' he said, 'because the Old Testament says that when Messiah came he would put down evil, and your Jesus did not do it. How could he be Messiah?'

The judgment to come

We saw last week what the Lord's answer to that problem is. He isn't intending at this moment to put down evil; he's not intending to root up the tares. He is allowing evil to grow to its full extent and, by the time the end of this age comes, the harvest of evil will be indescribably devilish. God is going to let it grow until harvest. *Then* the judgment shall come. *Then* the dragnet will be brought in. *Then* the bad fish will be sorted out from the good. *Then* the tares will be rooted up and cast into the burning furnace, and the wheat will be gathered into the barn. Until *then*, Christ is not trying to put down evil with the sword of politics or force. What he is doing is to go forth like the sower to preach the word of the kingdom that people might believe and be saved.

So the judgment does not come until the end of the age. That's one side of the story, but there are two sides. Now let us look for a moment at the other side. The judgment doesn't come until the second coming of our Lord; and the other side is the judgment now.

The judgment is now

'This is the judgment,' says the fourth gospel, 'that light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil. Whoever believes in the Son is not judged. Whoever does not believe has been judged already' (see John 3:18–21). And this day, maybe in this city, there have been men and women who have settled their eternal judgment today, for they have met the Saviour, and they have come to their final decision of life.

What a serious thing that is. Many think of the final judgment as something a long, long, long way ahead and forget that when they come face-to-face with Jesus Christ their attitude to him, here and now, settles their eternal judgment.

Judged according to evidence

That being so, what a solemn thing this matter of evidence is. God himself never asks anybody to believe blindly without any evidence. Let me repeat that. God himself never asks anybody to believe blindly without evidence, because if God asked us to believe without evidence, well we could just as easily believe the devil as believe God. How would you know the difference? God will give the evidence, and one of the things that will be held up to men in the great day of judgment is this: 'What did you do with the evidence?'

Not all men have equal evidence, and these verses that we read remind us of that. It shall be more tolerable for the men of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than it will be for the men of the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (see 11:20–23). Why? It's because the men of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum had evidence. The blessed Lord himself bothered to be among them, speaking with them face to face. With that kind of evidence in front of them, they rejected it. It will be more tolerable for the men of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for them. Why? Because in Sodom they had witnesses, such as the witness of Lot, fitful though that was, and finally the witness and warning of angels; but not the incarnate Son of God. One of the principles of the judgment is what we have done with the evidence available.

While we're on that topic, let us notice another slightly different rendering of that theme. Our Lord says, in chapter 12:

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (vv. 41–42)

What have you done with the evidence? Secondly, how keen were you to hear the evidence? Consider the Queen of Sheba, way down there across the distant desert in Sheba, and she heard of Solomon! It could only have been a rumour, but she was so keen on hearing wisdom and finding true wisdom that she came all the way from Sheba, right to Jerusalem to hear Solomon. She shall rise up in the judgment with some people in Belfast who wouldn't cross the street to hear the gospel. They couldn't bother their heads to open a Bible. Yes, in our compassion we must go to them. Do please let us not forget the other side. They are

responsible to God. What rumour they hear about God around the place should be enough to make them seek it out. 'Seek the Lord while he may be found' is the command of the prophet (Isa 55:6). Man will not be able to sit on his seat when the final judgment has come and say, 'Well, God, nobody came knocking on my door; nobody came into my room, and so I didn't come to you.' They could have come and sought. The men of this generation, they shall suffer, because the Queen of Sheba will rise up and judge them.

And while we apply the lesson to the unconverted, shall not the same principle be used at the judgment seat of Christ (see 2 Cor 5:9-11)? Have you not heard missionaries say that, out in the bush in Angola, when they went and preached at the conference and expounded the word of God, there came believers who had walked for three days without shoes and in their rags. What for? To hear the word of God expounded. How far would we go? How keen are we to hear?

Convicted by their own words

While we're on this theme, before we turn to pleasanter things, let me remind you of what our Lord did when the Pharisees took counsel to destroy him. We are told in chapter 12 that when our Lord did a miracle, 'The Pharisees heard the people saying, "Is this the Son of David? Can this be the Son of David?" And when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "This man does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the prince of demons"' (see vv. 22-24). And so they came to their conclusion that Jesus was not the Messiah. They said he could not possibly be the Messiah, that he was in fact in collusion with the devil himself, and they were not going to believe.

You say, 'That's terrible. Imagine anybody saying that Jesus Christ was of the devil. There's no good talking to men like that. Just leave them. Leave them in their folly, get on and go out and preach the gospel!'

Ah, yes, but Christ didn't leave them quite that soon. Here were men on the verge of committing the unpardonable sin. It would damn their souls for eternity. They are so determined to reject the gospel and the word of Christ that they'll call Jesus, 'Beelzebub'. Before Christ leaves them, he'll have five or six things to say to these men. He will expose them inside out and show them that in rejecting the gospel and saying that Jesus is in league with Beelzebub, they are being as arbitrary as they can be. They are going against their own standards of conscience and judgment, and they are being deliberately and perversely wicked. He will not allow them to hide behind their supposed intellectual doubts and difficulties.

It is one of the most solemn parts of Scripture, and I find myself thinking that our blessed Lord will perhaps do something like this when he sits on the great white throne. In that day, we are told he shall judge the very secrets of men (Rom 2:16), so that when a man who has deliberately rejected the gospel comes before him and says he's got strong reasons for rejecting it, our blessed Lord will open that man's heart, memory and conscience and show him that in order to reject the life of God, that man deliberately and perversely went against his own moral judgment and his own moral standards, and his own intellectual standards as well and refused to believe, not out of honesty, nor out of an excess of intellect, but through moral perversity.

God will never let anybody go down into the lake of fire imagining that it was his intellect that took him there, or that he was so marvellously clever that of course he couldn't bring himself to believe like those humble folks round the corner. No, God won't have it done. God will show every man who is lost the real reason why he refused to believe.

Jesus said to these men on this occasion, 'So, you say, gentlemen, do you, that I cast out this demon by the prince of demons? Now that's very interesting, because every kingdom divided against itself falls, doesn't it? Every city or house divided against itself falls; it can't possibly stand. So Satan is now in the business of casting out demons, so Satan is about winding himself up, isn't he, gentlemen, according to you? How marvellous. Satan has decided to destroy himself. Is that what you believe, gentlemen?'

He continues, 'I hear that your sons cast out demons sometimes, don't they? Pray tell me, by whom do you imagine they cast out demons?'

That was a potent question, wasn't it?

'What was the difference? They cast out demons, and you say that's okay. I cast out demons, and you say that's the devil. What's the difference, gentlemen?'

Well it was of course that their sons didn't claim to be Messiah, and Jesus did. Their sons cast out demons, and their parents and uncles and aunts could say, 'Oh, what delightful boys.' And when the boy came round and said, 'Yes, aunt, and I want your donkey,' or, 'I want money for my gospel mission,' they'd happily give it. But when Jesus cast out a demon, he claimed to be the Messiah and demanded people's repentance, faith and belief. That, they were not prepared to do. And, because they were not prepared to believe that he was Messiah, because of all that would entail for them personally, then they had to find out some excuse, and the only excuse they could think of was to say that the power he had must be from the devil.

Then he used another picture to show them the irrational implications of what they were saying:

Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. (v. 29)

What about doing a burglary or two, or making a raid on some stately home and getting out all its treasures? What if you were to have a go at that? Not you; I mean hypothetically. What do you suppose you'd need to do if Lord So-and-so has beautiful art, treasures and everything like that under the sun, and you were going in to rob the place? Well you've got to put Lord So-and-so out of action to start with, haven't you? You'd have to bash him on the head, tie him up to his chair, and his wife likewise, stuff their mouths, and then cut the telephone wires and goodness knows what else, and see to it that the police don't hear about it for the next ten hours, before you make off with the loot. Do you suppose Lord So-and-so is going to assist you and help you to load up the loot?

Says our Lord, 'I delivered this man from the grip of satanic evil, and you have the nonsense to say I'm in league with the devil himself in doing it? Therefore, I say unto you, every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven, except that spoken against the Holy Spirit; it shall never be forgiven. What's more, gentlemen, I tell you that for every idle word that men

...speak, they shall give an account in the day of judgment; for by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned' (see vv. 31–32, 36–37).

Oh, the terrible power of words, because they tell out our hearts, and, finally, our attitude to the Saviour is shown by our words. These are solemn things, aren't they? But we want to be reminded of the solemnity of preaching. Our blessed Lord has gone, and we are sent out to be sowers as he was, to sow the word of the kingdom. And let me say again how we do need to feel the responsibility of it. Upon that word that we speak by God's grace, man's eternity hangs. Men settle their judgment here and now by their response to that word.

The Son speaks to his Father

But if our eternal destiny depends on our response to God's word, on our perceiving that Jesus is the Messiah (and it does) then how can I come with certainty to the knowledge that he is Messiah?

So now our Lord turns to speak. At that very season when he had been obliged to denounce the people of Bethsaida and Chorazin for their rejection of the evidence of his miracles (11:20–24), he turns and says some delightful things: 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children' (v. 25). He'd just been talking about the crowd being children and reproaching them for being children (vv. 16–19). Now he commends those that are little children.

Let us take these lovely verses, enough for a whole series of sermons for six weeks on end, and just pick out some of their major points.

The Father's complete sovereignty

First of all, there is the complete sovereignty of the Father:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (vv. 25–26)

Principle number one: if we would know God, then we are altogether shut up to God showing himself to us. Here we read of the absolute sovereignty of the Father. He hides these things from the wise and prudent (and when God hides something, you'll never find it), and he reveals them to little children. And I can hear my Calvinist friends behind me rejoicing and thinking I've got converted to Calvinism at last. They will say, 'If I'm going to know God, it will be because God reveals it.'

Yes, it will be indeed, but then it is for this reason. Do you know, I can never get to know you either unless you choose to reveal yourself to me. You're not God, but that is a fact about you. Oh, I could get to know a lot about you. I could go and ask your schoolmaster and your parents. I could go and ask your manager at work or your employees. I could go and ask your wife and your children, the butcher and baker and candlestick maker. I could ask the police if need be. I could go and ask a lot of things. I could get the medics to take X-rays and scans of you and know you inside out and upside down; but if you didn't choose to reveal

your inner thoughts and heart to me, I should never know you. Why? It's because you're not just a molecule of soup; you are a person.

If you know a bit about daffodils, you can analyse them up hill and down dale and you'll find out their very last secret and the very last atom and the nucleus and all the protons and neutrons, and you'll know all about them. Even then, you mightn't know the energy of which they are made. Never mind. But when it comes to people, simply because they're people, you'll only know what they choose to let you know.

And God is a person; he's not a set of theological doctrines. You can't get up one morning and say, 'I'm going to know God this morning, because I've got enough brains to do it. Give me half an hour, and I'll work out the evidence, and I'll come to my algebraic conclusions, and now I've got him!' You never will, because the Almighty isn't like that. He's a person, and he is the Almighty person. Oh, what a privilege it is! Haven't you thought of it? He deigns to let you know something about him! You go and ask Her Majesty the Queen and say, 'Your Majesty, excuse me, I'd like you to tell me what you think about this or that subject.' What do you think she'll say?

She might say, 'Did I ask you to speak?' For you'll never speak to Her Majesty unless she first speaks to you, unless you want a stinging rebuke.

And that the Almighty Creator should let himself be known by tiny mites in cheese like we are, that is something. You can come to him with all your great wisdom (I'm not criticising your great wisdom; have as much wisdom as you can get); but if you think you're coming because you are so colossally wise, philosophical or in any other way, and so you're going to know God, you'll find yourself disappointed. He will hide himself from you. He isn't that little; he isn't that small that you can just work him out so long as you have brains big enough. He is a person, but he's prepared to reveal himself to little children. Ah, the wonder of it is astounding, that he should condescend to such lowly people, personalities, minds and hearts, and let them know about himself.

The Son's exclusive rights

When we have thought of the sovereignty of the Father in making himself known, then we think of the exclusive rights of the Son:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (v. 27)

Nothing has ever been known about the Father, the transcendent Lord, except what the second person in the Trinity, the Son of God, made known. 'No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (see John 1:18). And if you want to know what God's ideas are about colour, well go to creation, but remember it was the Son of God who made the creation. If you want to know what God's ideas are on music, well go to creation and the human ear, but remember it was the Son of God who made the human ear. 'No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' He has (forgive the term, this is not meant in the commercial sense) the exclusive *monopoly* on the knowledge of God.

In these days when Jesus Christ has been whittled down, even by Christendom, to being just 'a man for others' or 'a bright prophet' or 'a Jew in advance of his day', I should remember the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ our Lord. He has the exclusive monopoly on the revelation of the Father.

What are his terms? 'Come to me, all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest' (v. 28). It doesn't even first say, 'Go and search your Bibles', good as that is. For the one who makes known God is a person, and he says, 'Come to me'. That is true, and we preach it to the unconverted. Let's preach it also to ourselves: not first my Bible, but first the Lord Jesus, using that office; but not the book without the person: first the person and then the book. So that even as I come to read these words as a believer, let me always remember I'm not coming to a philosophical document or a theological system; I am coming to a person.

What a blessed thing that is. He says, 'Come to *me* and I will give you rest,' all of you who are burdened and heavy laden; be it with religious rights and ceremonies, or with the responsibilities of the law, or wrestling with your great theological problems, or your doubts and difficulties. How can you make sense of it, like John the Baptist in the prison? What a labour it can turn out to be sometimes. The blessed Lord stands, he who has the monopoly on making God known, and he says, 'Come to me; I'll take the burden out of it. I'll take the distress out of it, and I will give you rest.' For ultimately it is he who is responsible for you, my brother, and you, my sister, in making known the transcendent Father to you. He and none other has that responsibility, ultimately. He uses all sorts of people in his service, but ultimately the God who none has seen or can see has committed to the Lord Jesus the communication of the Father to you. It is his personal responsibility: 'Come to me,' he says. 'I'll take the labour out of it, the over hard labour, the distressing toil, and I will give you rest.'

The easy yoke and the light burden

The terms? 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.' The yoke of course is a symbol of government. He speaks as a king. If I come, I must be prepared to do what he says. He speaks as a teacher. When Jewish rabbis expounded the law and laid down the rules and regulations, they talked of it as their yoke, and our Lord speaks as a teacher. He asks that we be prepared to accept his government of our lives so that he may teach us and, sooner or later, he will do it. Knowing God is not just an academic exercise, for if I'm serious in knowing God, then the Saviour will put his yoke on me. And, in his government of my life, he will bring me through such circumstances as I need to be brought through, so as to appreciate and know the Father.

'And you shall find rest for your souls' (v. 29). Can I believe that all of life is to be put under his control and that the circumstances are being controlled by the Lord of heaven and earth to this blessed end: that Christ may teach me the Father? Is it not so? Why am I here in this world? Why is there this great world and universe? Oh, how many of the problems that there are on earth that we shall never solve. He has them in his hands; he is Lord of heaven and earth, and the whole thing is geared that the Father might make himself known to me.

'My yoke is easy,' he said; 'my burden is light.' And in two Sabbaths, consecutively, he gave evidence to show us how it is that his burden is light (12:1-21). I'm not going to repeat

them, but I'd suggest to you that you might care to look at the two incidents that follow on those two Sabbath days and see how they illustrate that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Christ greater than the temple

The first one is the story of how the apostles on a Sabbath day were going through the cornfields, and they roughed the ears of corn in their hands, threw the chaff away and ate them. According to certain Pharisees' interpretations of the laws of Sabbath, that was work, and they were breaking the Sabbath. Our Lord gave them a reply that had many details that we must omit tonight, but perhaps the most delightful thing was this. He said, 'Gentlemen, in the temple up the road, on a Sabbath day, the priests break the Sabbath, don't they?' In the temple, work has to go on: sacrifices have to be prepared, incense burnt, showbread taken here and taken there. So the work in the temple has to continue on a Sabbath. Outside the temple it all stops, but in the temple it can't stop. Why not? Well, the temple is God's residence, and man has to cease from his own work, but man must not cease from the work of God (see 12:1-8).

In the temple, the priests break the Sabbath, every Sabbath. The service of God must go on in the temple. The Pharisees knew this was so. Our Lord said to them, 'The fact is that, walking among these disciples in the midst of this corn is one whose service is greater than that done in the temple. And though it be but roughing ears of corn, my disciples are doing it for me, who am greater than the temple.'

Ah, I begin to see. My work should be governed by what I think of him, how I value him. Shall I take his yoke? Shall I serve him today? You say, 'The demand he makes is heavy.' Wait a moment, just before you decide that. Who is it you're working for, when peeling the potatoes for the two thousand five hundred and sixty-seventh time, or totting up the old accounts? In all those bits of work that sometimes are pleasing and often times are drudgery, we are to obey and do it out of a heart for the Lord. 'Difficult,' you say. Yes, so it is, but who is it you're doing it for? Who is it whose yoke we have upon our necks? Whether you find his yoke easy or find it hard depends on who you think Jesus Christ is and on how you value him. Isn't that so?

Here's a woman waiting for her husband, and he's coming home, late as usual: 'I cook him dinner and when he's eaten it, he doesn't even say thank you!' What a drudgery it is. And if the Queen's limousine stopped outside, and the chauffeur said, 'Her Majesty's car has broken down, madam, could you give her a cup of tea?' Oh, the cup of tea would be got, and there would never have been such a moment of delightful occupation as making this cup of tea, and you could live on that experience for the next six months, if not six years or sixty, and grandchildren in 2056 will be told by granny how one day the Queen's car stopped outside our house, and she asked for a cup of tea! 'Thankfully, I had the good cups kept in the china cabinet, and I was ready for it!'

What made the difference between doing it for her and doing it for hubby? 'Well,' you say, 'but that was only him, and this was the Queen!'

One greater than that is here.

How he values us

Now on the second Sabbath they learnt what he thought of them, for there was a man there with a withered hand, and the Pharisees were going to object to his being healed on the Sabbath. It was work, according to them, and our Lord said, 'Then what man of you shall there be that shall have one sheep, and if it should fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will you not lay hold on it and lift it out?' (see 12:11). Well, of course they would. If the sheep fell into a pit, they'd lift it up on the Sabbath, because the thing might die. And I mean to say, what with inflation and things, sheep are mightily valuable, aren't they? You can't afford to lose a whole sheep. It was money.

Oh, I see.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'but of how much more value is a man than a sheep?'

Of value to whom?

There speaks the Son of the Father, Lord of heaven and earth, and I ask you to ponder it. While Pharisees would make the man wait, the Son says, 'No, that man mustn't wait, because he's valuable; he's valuable to the Father: of how much more value is a man than a sheep?'

Can you answer that question?

You say, 'How would I know how much more valuable I am to God than a sheep?'

Do consider the unique Son of God and how he taught you at what level God values you; for the Father gave the Son to be the Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14).

Conclusion: Lord and Saviour

What I think of him: one greater than the temple.

What he thinks of me: of more value than a sheep.

When I look to him, I begin to discover what God is like and why the yoke of Christ is easy. He is the one that imposes the yoke, and he must be obeyed. There's no mincing matters here; he is the Father's only Son, the eternal Word. He's there to command, to give the orders, to be obeyed. What makes it easy to take orders from Christ? 'Why, this,' you say, 'before he ordered me to do anything, he first of all obeyed himself.'

There came to him someone from the crowd, and they said to him, 'Your mother is outside and your brothers and sisters, and they're looking for you.' He said, 'Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? For he who does the will of my father who is in heaven, he is my, brother, sister, mother' (see vv. 46-50).

Why? What made the relationship? Well, if they were prepared to do the will of his Father in heaven that makes them his brothers and sisters, and that's what he said himself. What a delightful king, and what a delightful Saviour. God grant us evermore to come to him, to take his yoke and learn from him that we might find rest for our souls.

About the Author

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