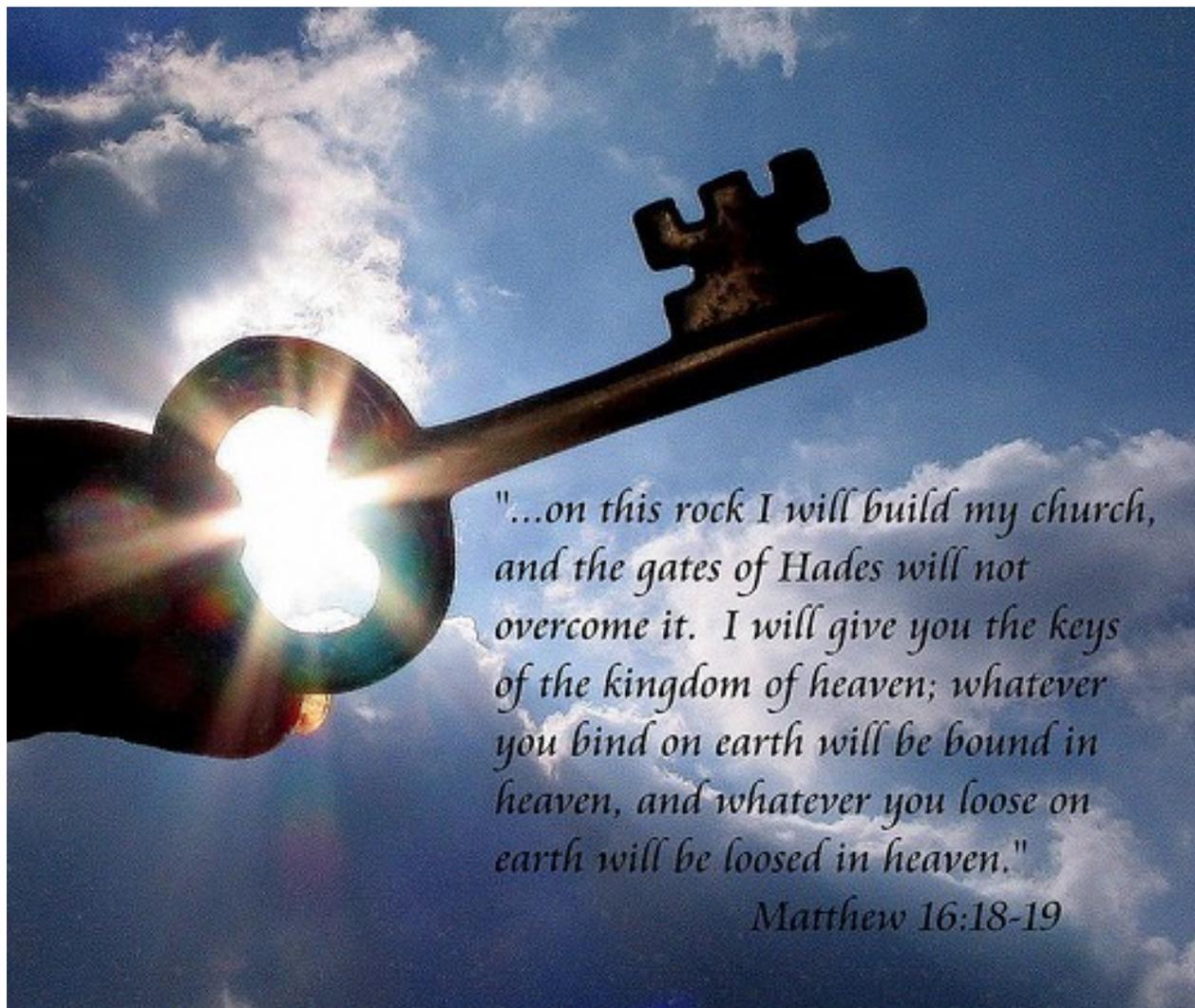


The Kingdom of Heaven



John Edmiston

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Introduction

To "The Kingdom of Heaven" This ebook contains 31 Eternity Daily Bible Studies on the "Kingdom of Heaven" as outlined in the Gospel of Matthew plus two introductory articles that explain some of the basic theology involved. These 33 articles are designed to give Christians an understanding of what Jesus meant when He talked about "the Kingdom of the Heavens"- which many bible students say was His main message.

On the way you will cover many practical issues on Christian living, ethics, Church & State, Christian ministry and the values we are supposed to live by as Christians. This is truly life-transforming material!

Read the Parable of the Leaven for a surprising look at how different Jesus' values were! Or "Render Unto Caesar" for His attitude to government and taxation.

The words of Jesus are timeless and piercing and never more so than when He talks about the Kingdom. These studies are "prophetic", not in the sense of telling the future but as in applying the prophetic call to righteousness to our situation today.

You may even do the ebook for assessment get credit with the Asian Internet Bible Institute and a certificate of completion. Just write a 4-page (2000 word) term paper on "The Kingdom of Heaven and The Church Today" and discuss four of the Kingdom saying of Jesus (one per page) and how they apply to church life and practice where you are today.

The Kingdom and Salvation

The question of who is saved and who isn't saved is often debated by Christians so I thought I would tackle the question by starting with Jesus' salvation message about the Kingdom of God. Jesus equates salvation with "entering the Kingdom of God" and the salvation message of Jesus was simple: (Matthew 4:17 NKJV) From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This means that salvation is experienced by those who truly repent and enter the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, this Kingdom is not a distant goal but is "at hand", just as a carpenter's hammer is at hand - available to those who reach out.

This Kingdom of God is defined by Paul as "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17) and portrayed in detail by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and the Matthew 13 parables. It is a realm where God rules and where His will is done on earth as it is done in the Heavens (Matthew 6). It is a touch of Heaven upon earth, it is glory, grace and truth in our midst. It is also a realm where God's provision is the central economic fact (Matthew 6:19-34).

Those who turn from sin, believe in Jesus and enter into righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit are those who have entered the Kingdom of God.

They are the true believers, the lovers of Heaven, the people who are of a Kingdom that is not a political Kingdom of this world (John 18:36) and which is not inherited "by flesh and blood" but is eternal, spiritual and glorious. (1 Corinthians 15:50 NKJV) Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.

According to the red letters of Jesus these precious heaven-loving saints are greater than all the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 11:11-13). Those who enter the Kingdom are citizens of the realm of truth, the heavens, being seated there with Christ (Ephesians 2:6) as members of the Heavenly Zion (Hebrews 12:22-24). This heavenly kingdom, this Kingdom of the Heavens, this realm of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit is a holy place with a holy lifestyle and glorious and holy inhabitants. (Hebrews 12:22-24). It is also a place of healing and resurrection and gospel living. (Matthew 10:7-8 NKJV) "And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' {8} "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."

The parables paint pictures of the Kingdom such as its holiness and purity (the dragnet, the wheat and the tares), the need for diligence to enter it (the ten virgins, the ten talents), the hidden influence of the Kingdom (the leaven) and its growth from small seeds of faith (the mustard seed). They also tell us of its varying reception by individuals (the sower and the soils, the King's banquet) and by Israel and the Gentiles (the King's messengers and Son).

Any broken sinner longing for healing, wholeness, righteousness, love, peace and joy can enter the kingdom of God in an instant as Zaccheus did and as the thief on the cross did. The prostitutes often enter before the self-righteous. (Matthew 21:31) The Kingdom is not a matter of continuous self-improvement of working harder, getting smarter and being more intensely religious. In fact it can be entered by those who do no works at all. (Romans 4)

The Kingdom is entered by the unspiritual, even the spiritually deprived and backward, the "poor in spirit": (Matthew 5:3 NKJV) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In fact the Kingdom is completely unreligious and does not require us to go to a temple, see a priest, wear a robe, take certain days as holy-days or any other nonsense. It's just for people who want God and love righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. By contrast the scribes and Pharisees lock people out of the Kingdom by encouraging hard-hearted legalism and making it full of commandments and impossible requirements. (Matthew 23:13)

Entering the Kingdom is easy and light and free of religious requirements: (Matthew 11:27-30 NKJV) "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. {28} "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. {29} "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. {30} "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

The Kingdom and is joyous, humble and child-like: (Matthew 18:1-5 NKJV) At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" {2} Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, {3} and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. {4} "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. {5} "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

Even in 90AD the apostle John said it was easy to be a Christian: "(1 John 5:3 NKJV) For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." The Christian life is unreligious and easy and the holiness is that of love and joy and peace not an artificial sanctity composed of human rules and regulations (Colossians 2:8-23).

The Kingdom is for those who love Heaven and righteousness and truth. For those who love holy things and who see that this world and all its lusts is passing away. In fact Kingdom folk love Heaven and glory so much they will gladly be persecuted for righteousness sake: "(Matthew 5:10 NKJV) Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Furthermore, they will separate completely from sin and all defilement. "(Mark 9:47 NKJV) "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire;"

Yet while God calls us to separation He is not stingy or unrewarding. We will not be worse off in the end. (Luke 18:29-30 NKJV) So He said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, {30} "who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life."

The holy and beautiful Kingdom requires "clean robes" and repentance (Matthew 22:11-14) and cannot be entered presumptuously. The unrepentant, the profane, the unholy, the vile, the lovers of pleasure and worldliness will not enter into the Kingdom. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 NKJV) Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, {10} nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

It is not praying a prayer or lip-service that makes one a Christian but joyfully doing the will of God. (Matthew 7:21 NKJV) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." And as the parable of the two sons shows doing the will of God involves real obedience not just saying you have the "willingness to obey". (Matthew 21:28-32)

The Kingdom is also difficult for the rich, the powerful and worldly to enter because of their deep attachment to this life. (Matthew 19:23-24 NKJV) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. {24} "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

This attachment to this life is like Lot's wife who "looked back" and believers are not to look back to a life in the world and the pleasures of Sodom. (Luke 9:62 NKJV) But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Neither is the Kingdom a matter of theological debate. (1 Corinthians 4:20 NKJV) For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. Rather the Kingdom of God is characterized by spiritual authority." (Matthew 12:28 NKJV) "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you." This authority was also to be exercised by believers: (Matthew 16:19 NKJV) "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The understanding of the Kingdom is for those that truly love holy things. To these are granted "the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven". The pearls are not to be cast before swine (Matthew 7:6) and those obsessed with earth will not grasp the nature of the Kingdom. (Matthew 13:11-13 NKJV) He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. {12} "For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. {13} "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

The imperceptibility of the Kingdom is due to the fact that it is an invisible, spiritual realm in our very midst, not an earthly Kingdom with a physical location. It is not "here" or "there" but at hand for all who believe. (Luke 17:20-22 NKJV) Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; {21} "nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

Paul puts it this way: (Romans 10:-69 NKJV) But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' "(that is, to bring Christ down from above) {7} or, " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' "(that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). {8} But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): {9} that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

The entrance to the Kingdom is not a matter of just knowing Jesus or believing in Jesus but being willing to be changed by Jesus and to become like Jesus. It's a matter of being born-again and being made new with a holy, righteous and heavenly nature. (John 3:3 NKJV) Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot

see the kingdom of God." This new birth is not a physical process but is accomplished by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5 NKJV) Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Those who have grasped the law of love are close to the Kingdom (Mark 12:32-34) for love is the Kingdoms' ruling ethos and its governing commandment (John 13:34, 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 13:9,10). Yet the gate to the Kingdom is narrow and entering requires effort. "(Luke 13:24 NKJV) "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able." This proper striving is a striving to keep the commandments of love:

(John 15:10-12 NKJV) "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. {11} "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. {12} "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

This love is not merely sentimental but is also honest, pure and truthful:

(1 Timothy 1:5 NKJV) Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith. In Acts we see that suffering was normal for those finding the Kingdom, it was no easy gospel. "

(Acts 14:22 NKJV) strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God."

Entering the Kingdom is not just a matter of "having a relationship with Jesus" because many who knew Jesus, such as Judas, will be outside the Kingdom and the so-called holy places like Jerusalem and Capernaum where Jesus preached will know wrath not blessing (Matthew 11:20-24). In fact many of those who knew Jesus as their next door neighbor will weep and wail and gnash their teeth.

(Luke 13:25-30 NKJV) "When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' {26} "then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' {27} "But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' {28} "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. {29} "They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. {30} "And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last."

This Luke 13 passage above also tells us that the Kingdom is not bounded by ethnicity or geography, it will be a universal Kingdom for all nations: "They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God." Neither will social rank lay any part in determining who is who in the Kingdom "And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last."

The Kingdom of God is a universal Kingdom and open to all who repent regardless of ethnicity, social rank or how messed up their lives may be. Yet it is still a holy Kingdom and the concept of "being worthy" of the Kingdom is common. (Luke 21:34-36 NKJV) "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. {35} "For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the

face of the whole earth. {36} "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Galatians 5 contrasts carnality and the works of the flesh are not worthy actions for the Christian "(Galatians 5:19-21 NKJV) Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, {20} idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, {21} envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." With the truly spiritual life:

(Galatians 5:22-25 NKJV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, {23} gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. {24} And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. {25} If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Note carefully that this "worthiness" and true spirituality is not the performance of vows, religious acts, or external observances such as circumcision or church attendance but is rather the life of a renewed heart filled with the love of God.

This worthiness is demonstrated in genuine practical love (1 John 3:16-18) and in the willingness to suffer for Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:3-5 NKJV) We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, {4} so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, {5} which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer;"

Some sinners do pray a sinners prayer and enter the Kingdom - they crash through into Heaven. Others pray a sinners prayer and walk away empty because they do not really want the Kingdom in their lives, ruling their soul and spirit and life. God is not going to be used for fire-insurance. He requires kingdom living from a repentant heart and a new born-again nature that believes in Christ and joyously obeys His commandments.

Yet salvation, and being a true believer is not a matter of religious works, but of trust in Christ, and faith born in our hearts through grace (Ephesians 2:8,9) and it is this faith that results in good works (Ephesians 2:10) because that's what Jesus would do and we are to be made like Him. (Romans 8:28-31).

So salvation is not a matter of praying a certain prayer, nor is it about doing certain religious works. Rather it's about repenting from sin and entering the Kingdom and exchanging the lifestyle of the world for the Christ-centered, loving, joyous and peaceful lifestyle of Heaven.

Word Study - The Kingdom of God

As the world draws close to the year 2000 and Christians ponder the meaning of a "New World Order" the Bible teaches us of a far more radical and truly ideal New World Order - the Kingdom of God, brought in through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth and inaugurated in power on the day of Pentecost. This word study will help bring this powerful doctrine to light and give you confidence and hope as you face the future - no matter what the political outcomes are. This article draws heavily upon from G.W. Bromiley's "Theological Dictionary of The New Testament".

The two main Greek words are "basileus" a King, and "basileia" a Kingdom. Ancillary words are "basileuo" to be king, to reign and "symbasileuo" to reign together with. The main phrases we will be concerned with are "basileia tou theou" Kingdom of God and "basileia ton ouranon" Kingdom of Heaven.

The "king" is the legitimate ruler. In both Greek and Hebrew thought the King derives his authority from God and is the source of all law in the land. For us this means that Jesus Christ is the authoritative governor of the heavens and the earth. It is His laws ultimately that must be obeyed. Even the kings, princes and tyrants of this world, the city state despots, the Jewish Sanhedrin and Caesar himself are accountable to the "royal law"(James 2:8) handed down by Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus is truly the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (1 Tim 6:16) before whom every knee will bow to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

Christ is king in the NT. He is first "king of the Jews" (Mt. 3:2; Mk 15:2, etc.), accused as such (Lk. 23:2-3), but also treated as a pretender (Jn. 19:12). The people want him as king in a political sense; hence he resists their pressure (Jn 6:15). Yet in a true sense he is indeed the promised "King of Israel" (Mt. 27:42; Mk.15:32).He enters Jerusalem as such (Zech. 9:9; Mt. 21:5), and as such will conduct the last judgment (Mt. 25:34). Outside the Gospels the NT seldom refers to Christ as King of the Jews or of Israel (though cf. Acts 17:7). John offers a christological definition of the kingdom in 18:37, and Revelation gives the royal title a cosmological dimension. I Tim. 6:16 gives Christ the same title as Revelation: "King of kings and Lord of lords:" I Cor. 15:24 implies the kingship of Christ when it speaks of the subjection of all other rule, authority, and power until at last the kingdom is handed to the Father

There are three "ideal Kings" in Scripture - Melchizedek, David and Jesus Christ. Melchizedek is a priestly King who received tithes from Abraham. David was the great earthly King of Israel who, though flawed, walked with God and Jesus Christ is the Messiah, Redeemer and God. These three kings are important for our understanding of the Kingdom of God. The constant theme of the prophets is that the Kingdom of the Messiah would be a better version of David's reign (Isaiah 9:6,7; 16:5; 55:3-5). A more ideal version where peace would be more profoundly experienced. (Jer 23:5-8) It was as if we were to look at the Davidic kingship as the closest human approximation to the Kingdom of God. When Jesus came His messiahship and the nature of His Kingdom was acknowledged by the title "Son of David" as well as "King of the Jews". Hebrews expands on the idea of a priestly Kingdom with its exposition of the role of Melchizedek in chapters 6 and 7 and the vision of the heavenly Zion in Hebrews 12. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of believer-priests (1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6) with Jesus as the High Priest (Hebrews 8:1,2; 9:11).

The Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven/Kingdom of The Father/Kingdom of Christ

These four expressions refer to slightly different aspects of the one reality. The Kingdom of Christ is the realm where Jesus Christ is the Messiah King, this Kingdom will put an end to all earthly Kingdoms (Rev. 11:15). Its present aim is stated in a difficult portion of 1 Corinthians 15:24-25 "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet." Thus we see that Christ's Kingdom while it "has no end" (Luke 1:33) gains its continuity from becoming the "Kingdom of the Father". As the purified and holy Messianic Kingdom it stands between the present evil age and all the ages to come.

Thus wrongdoers will have to be gathered out of it by angels and the last judgment (Matt 13:41) and it will come while this earth in its present form and some will see the Son of Man in His Kingdom (Mt 16:28). It was inaugurated at the cross, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—most particularly through the ascension. The thief on the cross realized that Jesus was in the process of entering into His Kingdom (Luke 23:42). Christ's Kingdom is "not of this world" John 18:36 and is not gained by force or militant discipleship (Jn 18:36). It is clearly linked with Christ's appearing (2 Timothy 4:1) and we are to be saved for it (2 Tim 4:16). Entrance into it is for Christians, especially those committed to spiritual growth (2 Peter 1:11).

Christ's Messianic Kingdom will have no place for evil and sinners will have no inheritance in it. (Ephesians 5:5). This verse also tells us that the kingdom is "the kingdom of Christ and of God". (Ephesians 5:5 NKJV) For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

The kingdom of heaven emphasizes the nature of the Kingdom as being "from above" and both transcending and interpenetrating earthly Kingdoms just as heaven both transcends and interpenetrates our present reality. It is a term chiefly used by Matthew. It is clearly a reign of God that is not arrived at by human effort but which is graciously given "from above". The term "Kingdom of the Father" (Matt 13:43, 26:29, 25:34, Luke 12:32) It is His Kingdom that we are to pray for in the Lord's prayer (Luke 11:2) and His kingdom in which the righteous shall shine like the sun (Matt 13:43).

The relationship between the various levels of Kingship (god, Christ and believers) is summed up in Luke 22:29,30. "And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." God bestows a kingdom on Christ who then bestows a kingdom on His followers so that they become "kings and priests to our God"(Rev. 1:6, 5:10). We are twice called co-rulers with Christ (1 Cor 4:8, 2 Timothy 2:12) but this information is not given to us so that we may be filled with inordinate pride as the Corinthians seemed to be (1 Cor 4:8) but so that we will be encouraged to endure in service with patience and obedience ((2 Timothy 2:12).

However, the concept of us reigning with Christ is of fairly broad application (Rev. 20:6) and Billheimer in his book "Destined For The Throne" has suggested that part of the reason for us learning to pray is so that we will "know the ropes" of Kingdom rulership when we take up our prepared places in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:7).

The major reference is of course to the "Kingdom of God" which is unshakeable ((Hebrews 12:28), heavenly (2 Tim 4:18) and eternal (2 Peter 1:11). Here are 12 short notes on the Kingdom:

1. God gives the Kingdom as a gift (Luke 12:32) to those who seek it above all things (Matt 6:33) God calls us to it (1 Thess 2:12), sets us in it (Col 1:13), and makes us worthy of it (2 Thess 1:5).
2. The Kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit, the persecuted and the "child-like". (Matt 5:3,10; 19:14)
3. The unaltered natural ("flesh and blood") man cannot enter the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:50). The Kingdom is entered by being "born again" (John 3:3) through irrevocable commitment (Luke 9:62) producing a new man in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:16,17).
4. The Kingdom is peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).
5. The Kingdom of God is accompanied by real power (Mark 9:1; 1 Cor 4:20) and is the most powerful kingdom of all (Revelations 11:15).
6. This Kingdom power is manifested in healings, miracles, exorcisms and raising of the dead (Matthew 4:23,24; 10:7,8; 12:28; Luke 9:2; 10:9).
7. It is a "glorious kingdom" - it will surpass all other kingdoms in wisdom, beauty, power, and wealth (1 Thess 2:12; Mark 10:37; Matt 6:13; 2 Tim 4:18; Rev. 21:10-22:5).
8. The Kingdom has small and humble beginnings - but grows! (Matt 13:31-32).
9. The Kingdom of God interpenetrates the structures of this world with an almost "invisible influence" (Matt 13:33; Luke 17:20-21) and is spiritually discerned (Mark 4:11; John 3:3; cf 1 Cor 2:14). Eventually it will be made manifest or obvious to all (Matthew 25:31-34; Phil 2:9-11; 2 Tim 4:1,18), the structures of this world will collapse, (Rev 11:15; 18:1-19:7) the heavens and earth depart (2 Peter 3:10) and only the Kingdom of God remain (Hebrews 12:26-29; Luke 1:33).
10. The kingdom is brought into being by being proclaimed – this proclamation can be to individuals or to entire communities. The gospel is this proclamation (Mark 1:14; Matt 4:23; Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12).
11. The kingdom is "a living thing" and participates in the properties of living things such as growth, vigor and having a "time of harvest" (Matthew 13:24-33).
12. The Kingdom of God requires some diligence to enter in. Like a prized pearl or treasure it must be sought and valued above all things (Matthew 13:44, 45), and a certain spiritual alertness and readiness of heart is always required of believers (Matt 25:1ff). Radical steps may be necessary if we are to fully enter it and leave the hindrances of those world behind (Matthew 5:29-30; 19:12). Temporary enthusiasm is insufficient (Luke 9:62) and the cost must be counted (Luke 14:28) and sometimes the supreme sacrifice be paid (Matt 10:37-39).

The kingdom and entering it are so important for us that we must be diligent to enter in. Some interpretations of grace minimize this aspect of diligence. Sin is the greatest hindrance and certain sins will ensure that we are outside of the kingdom. The intent of the process of sanctification and washing with the blood of Christ is to remove these sins from us. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NKJV). Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, {10} nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will

inherit the kingdom of God. {11} And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

Wealth is another great hindrance to inheriting the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:23-24 NKJV) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. {24} "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." As are a preoccupation with worldly things (Luke 9:20ff) , spiritual lethargy (Matthew 18;23ff; 25:1ff), and absorption into a self-centered lifestyle (Matthew 25:31-46). People can be hindered from entering by legalistic teachings (Luke 11:52) or released into it through the apostolic proclamation of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God (Matthew 16:19).

The Kingdom of the Heavens

(Matthew 4:17 NKJV) From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

(Matthew 5:3 NKJV) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus starts His ministry by talking about something called "the kingdom of heaven". It's a strange phrase to our ears so it worth exploring. It is one of the foundational concepts of Jesus' message on earth and gets at least 101 mentions in the NT by my counting in the NKJV.

Firstly, we need to at least translate it correctly. Matthew refers to the Kingdom of God as "the Kingdom of the Heavens" and in translation the plural is often lost so it comes across in English as "the Kingdom of Heaven". It's plural in the Greek (ouranon - omega nu ending) and also in the Hebrews "shamayim".)

The Jews had three heavens: The first heaven is where "the birds of the heavens" fly. (Genesis 1:20, Psalm 104:12, Daniel 2:38). The mid-heaven or second heaven is where the angels fly and do battle. (Revelation 12:4-12, 14:6,7) After the second heaven is cleansed in chapter 12, the gospel is proclaimed in it in chapter 14! The third heaven is where God dwells, where Satan was cast out of and where Paul or the person He knew heard "inexpressible things". (2 Corinthians 12:2 NKJV) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago; whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows; such a one was caught up to the third heaven.

The easiest way to see this is to follow the doom of Satan. Satan falls from third heaven where he as an anointed cherub, to second heaven in the OT, after the cross he falls from second heaven to become "the prince of the power of the air" in Ephesians. After a battle in Rev 12 where Satan tries to retake the second heaven he is cast out of the heavens entirely. He is forced to Earth and incarnates as the Anti-Christ. He wars with God and is cast to the Pit. After 1000 years Satan tries to retake Earth and loses yet again and his final place of punishment in the lake of fire. So Satan goes from the third heaven, to the second heaven, then the first heaven, then earth, into the pit, and finally into lake of fire.

The kingdom of the heavens is Jesus saying that the powers of the heavens were becoming available on earth and a new lifestyle was being declared, a holy lifestyle to handle holy things. The kingdom of the heavens is where God's heavenly power is manifest, where the will of God is done 'on earth as it is in heaven" where His power reaches out of the Third heaven and down to us in healing, resurrections, exorcisms and transformations and in the gospel being preached to the poor.

The kingdom of the heavens is not so much a theological term as a reference to where heavenly power is unleashed. (Matthew 10:7-8 NKJV) "And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' {8} "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

The kingdom of the Heavens is available only to the repentant. To the contrite the Kingdom of Heaven is "at hand", just as a carpenter's hammer is at hand - available to those who reach out. While there are no special requirements to enter the Kingdom it is not available for mere lip-

service. The Kingdom is for those who love righteousness and is only available to those who adopt its lifestyle of doing the will of God. (Matthew 7:21 NKJV) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

Thus the Kingdom of the Heavens is where people agree to behave as if they were in Heaven and do God's will on earth as it is done in heaven and where the powers of heaven intersect human history in Christ and in his church. It's about exchanging the lifestyle of the world for the Christ-centered, loving, joyous and peaceful lifestyle of Heaven. This is why it was central to Jesus' message and why the Sermon On The Mount makes constant reference to it. Heaven sets the true standard for Christian behavior and lifestyle. When we enter the Kingdom of the Heavens we get a new, born-again nature, seated in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6), that wants to live a supernatural heavenly life of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). We are citizens of Heaven and dwell spiritually in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus was saying something very profound when He started talking about the Kingdom of the Heavens. For Him entering it was a matter of ultimate importance. Its standards were the right standards. Its values the right values.

The Law of Love

(James 2:8 NKJV) If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; (Galatians 5:14 KJV) For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

In the kingdom of the heavens there is a "royal law", and James spells it out as the well-known commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself,". The law of the Kingdom is not a long list of do's and don'ts and religious taboos. It has just one great overall law, this law of love.

Let's start back at the basics. The Kingdom of Heaven is a kingdom of love and when God's will is done on earth as it is done in Heaven the result is a loving community of Spirit—filled believers like the Jerusalem church in Acts 2-5. The central Christian requirement is to love God, to love one another, to love the brethren, and to live in a way that builds other people up and which blesses their lives.

The manifestation of the Kingdom will be a loving, peaceful and righteous community of faithful believers. It will be filled with grace and truth and have healing and spiritual power in its midst and be eager to fulfill the commandments of Jesus. This community will be a place where the "one another" commands of the gospels are fulfilled. How we treat one another is the basis of Christian community and a list of the "one another" imperatives in the NT is included below.

The One Another Commands

There are many "one another" commands in Scripture: have peace with one another (Matthew 9:50) and love one another as I have loved you (John 13:34, Romans 13:8). Romans 12 and following has a whole string of them: be kindly affectionate to one another (v.10), give preference to one another (v.10) be of the same mind to one another (v.16), do not judge (Rom 14:13), accept o.a. (Romans 15:7), admonish o.a. (Rom 15:14), Greet one another with a holy kiss (Rom 16:6, 1 Cor 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12) And the problems of the early church mean that the epistles are full of them such as: do not go to law with o.a. (1 Cor 6:7) do not deprive one another (1 Cor 7:5) wait for one another (1 Cor 11:33), have the same care for one another (1 Cor 12:25), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), bear with one another (Eph 4:2), be kind to one another (Eph 4:32) forgive one another (Eph 4:32), speaking to one another in psalms and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19) submit to one another (Eph 5:21) , do not lie to one another (Col 3:9), comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18) edify one another (1 Thess 5:11), exhort one another (Heb 3:13) consider the spiritual condition of one another (Hebrews 10:24), confess your sins to one another (James 5:16) and pray for one another (James 5:16), have compassion for one another (1 Peter 3:8), be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9) and minister to one another (1 Peter 4:10) plus a host of "do not's" such as do not grumble to one another etc.

The Dynamic of the Kingdom Of Love Is a New Nature

(Colossians 1:8 NKJV) who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

(1 John 4:12-19 NKJV) No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. {13} By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit... {16} And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. {17}

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. {18} There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. {19} We love Him because He first loved us.

To live in the flow of the "one another" commands of the New Testament requires a radical death to human selfishness and to the proud and contentious nature of the flesh. This can only be accomplished through the cross in the power of the Holy Spirit. We can only love if God works that love in our hearts first. We do not naturally love in the sense of "agape" Kingdom love, we love because He first loved us.

We need a new born-again nature filled with the Holy Spirit if we are to joyously and easily and lightly carry out the commands of Christ to love one another as we love ourselves. Unless Christ in us does these things they simply will not be done. Life is too busy, too fearful, too self-preserving for us to think much of others and their needs.

The old nature will go to a thousand churches and perform a million penances rather than die to self. The law of Christ and His Kingdom does away with all these externals. The law of Christ demands the one thing the old nature will not, indeed cannot do - that is to be utterly selflessly loving in all righteousness and truth. Our Christian duty boils down to just one utterly impossible duty - to love our neighbors as ourselves. But what is impossible with man is possible with God. With Christ in our lives we can be truly loving, we can fulfill the royal law by the power of the Holy Spirit. And when we do, we start to do God's will on earth as it is in Heaven and we begin the manifesting of the Kingdom of the Heavens.

The Heart of Believers

(Matthew 5:8 NKJV) Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.

(Isaiah 57:15 NKJV) For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

(Hebrews 8:10-12 NKJV) "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. {11} "None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. {12} "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."

God dwells in two places - in the throne room of Heaven and in the hearts of the humble and contrite believers. (Isaiah 57:15) The heart is the first place that the law of God is written, (Hebrews 8:10-12) agreed with and obeyed. (Romans 6:17-18 NKJV) But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. {18} And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

Obeying from the heart ends hypocrisy and the "external faith" of rules and regulations and human appearances. Obeying from the heart means having a sincere and truthful love for one another out of the fear of God. (1 Peter 1:22 NKJV) Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart.

The Kingdom arrives first in hearts that believe in Jesus Christ, love righteousness and long for heaven. In hearts which are committed to loving one another "from the heart".

The Kingdom is thus not a ritual or a structure but a place where human hearts are aligned with God and are full of love, joy and peace. Imagine iron filings being aligned by a magnet. That is how human hearts are aligned to God through faith and the presence of the Holy Spirit. It's a spiritual tuning of the inner beings of believers to the will of God.

Something has changed since Jeremiah's assessment of the human heart as deceitful and wicked. A redemption has taken place, a cleansing has occurred, a death and resurrection has been undergone, a new covenant has been made and the law has been written on our hearts and we now know God and Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17). Thus deep in the heart of every believer is a high and holy place filled with the Spirit where Christ dwells and where the Kingdom of the Heavens is established and can break forth from.

The Kingdom comes into the human heart by faith and flows out from the human heart through works done in love. Thus Christians do not work "up to" a standard, in order to gain approval but "out from" an inner being filled with God, to express the love that God has placed within them. The Kingdom arrives within me through the Holy Spirit, the promised gift of God, and as the Kingdom arrives within me it is expressed in my life. I do not try to create the Kingdom of God by human effort and construction. It's already there, inside me, in my heart. I can enter the Kingdom, and I can inherit the Kingdom and its blessings but I cannot construct it. It's a perfect

eternal work of God and I cannot ever construct something perfect and eternal from my own wisdom.

The Kingdom is thus not a strained and difficult obedience to an external standard. It is not something that is elusive and which I have to make happen by being a perfect person and leading the perfect church and getting everything just right. The Kingdom does not come as a reward for legalistic living. And it doesn't come through intense communal living. I used to think that if we have revival and then, maybe we will have a Christian community and if we work really hard we might get a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. That is not the case. The Kingdom is already here, it's already at hand, it has already turned up in the faith and love that God has placed in the hearts of those who believe. As we simply, humbly, live out from that faith and love inside us the manifestation of the Kingdom arrives.

The perfect is both "out there" and "in here". The perfect is in the throne room of heaven and in the hearts of Christians. The pure in heart will see God. (Matthew 5:8) The contrite in heart are indwelt by God. (Isaiah 57:15). And if we abide in Him, then He abides in us, makes His home in us, and dwells with us. And surely that is the Kingdom of Heaven, to be where God is dwelling. And He dwells in believers. There is something absolutely perfect deep down in every Christian, that perfection is Christ in you the hope of glory. Your heart is the base camp for the Kingdom of God and from that base camp the Kingdom can come in power and the gospel can be preached to all creation.

Thus Christianity is an inside out faith. Christianity proceeds out to the world from the inside of the saint, from Christ in them, from the treasure in earthen vessels. In our flesh dwells no good thing but in our heart dwells Christ. You are not a useless wretch having to live up to high and holy laws written on tablets of stone by an unyielding God. You are a Christ indwelt saint, with the law of God written on your heart, and from your heart can come love and joy and peace and all the good righteous things that accompany the gospel of God. The Kingdom is both in heaven and in the contrite hearts of believers. Your Christ-indwelt heart is the base camp for the Kingdom of God.

Accessible to the Unspiritual

Matthew 5:3 ASV Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 21:31-32 LITV Which of the two did the will of the father? They said to Him, The first. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, The tax collectors and the harlots go before you into the kingdom of God. (32) For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But the tax-collectors and the harlots believed him. And having seen, you did not repent afterward to believe him.

The scribes and Pharisees, the "spiritual ones" failed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven while the tax-collectors (frequently corrupt and violent in Jesus' day) and prostitutes went into the Kingdom with gladness and joy. In fact Jesus says that the unreligious, the spiritual failures, the poor in spirit are blessed - for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Paul is even more bold when he writes in Romans: But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness. (Romans 4:5 ASV) God justifies the ungodly! Those who do no spiritual works at all and are completely without any form of piety. The Greek word of ungodly was "asebes" and meant "without piety or due and proper reverence for the gods, impious" and was the very worst category of person in Hellenistic society, doomed to be slaughtered by the wrath of God. (see the epistle Jude for the frequent use of this word). God justifies even the most impious person who decides to trust in Christ as Lord and Savior.

What the New Testament emphasizes over and over again with such comments is that "Jacob's Ladder" of spiritual ascent is simply abolished. There is not a progressive getting better and better, becoming more and more disciplined, more and more spiritual and ever more particular and fussy until you are so good that you break through into Heaven. Human effort and religious works get us nowhere, the Kingdom is from grace to grace and from faith to faith. Works and spiritual exercises have no part in it. The cretins enter before the wise. "Lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:9) and Romans 3:27 BBE What reason, then, is there for pride? It is shut out. By what sort of law? of works? No, but by a law of faith.

Now most evangelicals know that salvation is by grace through faith and many can quote Ephesians 2:8,9 by heart. They are good verses. But they then transfer Jacob's Ladder to the process of sanctification and turn it into a laborious spiritual exercise, a treadmill of spirituality, a long list of do's and don'ts and works of all shapes and sizes. But what do the Scriptures say? Paul addresses this in Galatians:

Galatians 3:2-5 BBE Give me an answer to this one question, Did the Spirit come to you through the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? (3) Are you so foolish? having made a start in the Spirit, will you now be made complete in the flesh? (4) Did you undergo such a number of things to no purpose? if it is in fact to no purpose. (5) He who gives you the Spirit, and does works of power among you, is it by the works of law, or by the hearing of faith?

We don't start out on the spiritual life by faith then improve it by running on a treadmill! We don't start with Jesus burden which is "easy and light" (Matthew 11:28-30) then improve it by making it difficult and heavy! We don't make a start in the Spirit then become complete in the flesh. 1 John even says: (1 John 5:3 NKJV) For this is the love of God, that we keep His

commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. And Paul says all the onerous human rules and regulations are useless and unprofitable:

(Colossians 2:20-23 NKJV) Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations; {21} "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," {22} which all concern things which perish with the using; according to the commandments and doctrines of men? {23} These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

The gospel is completely unreligious. It does away with temples and robes and sacrifices and offerings and laws and fulfills them all in Christ. Religion was fulfilled completely in Christ Jesus. Since 29 AD when Jesus died on the cross we have been in a post-religious era. An era of the Spirit and of faith. How then do we "make progress" if not by doing religious works and making sacrifices and giving offerings and going to temples? By "the hearing with faith"! (Romans 1:17 NKJV) For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

From start to finish the Christian life is an unreligious journey of faith, where we hear the word of God and believe it and live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, are filled with the Spirit and dwell in love. Thus the whole of our "life in the flesh" is an active living by faith in the Son of God. (Galatians 2:20-21 NKJV) "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. {21} "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain." Does this unreligious faith mean we can sin all we like? Not at all faith leads us into holiness. Grace is given to make us spotless. How can we who died to sin still live in it?

The unreligious faith we have in Christ Jesus, the faith without works and rituals, is still a holy and righteous faith - it is just a free faith. A faith uncluttered by pomp, religion and rules about eating pork or going to temples. A faith that unspiritual, unreligious people can enter into and live in love.

Good Works

(Ephesians 2:8-10 NKJV) For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, {9} not of works, lest anyone should boast. {10} For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

The Inquiry

The chapter on the "Kingdom of Heaven Is Accessible To The Unspiritual" provoked the following very good question:

Help me to understand. I believe, trust, depend and rely on the Lord Jesus. I have repented and asked forgiveness of my sins. I have confessed Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I have called upon the name of the Lord, and I believe that I am saved. Having done such, the Bible tells me that I am saved. I know that I am saved by the grace of God and not of my works. Based on what the Bible tells me, I believe that my salvation is secured. However, James 2:17 states that faith without works is dead. To me that means that as a result of my faith in the Lord Jesus, I do good works. I don't think that I do good works to get saved (or stay saved) but because I am saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. What am I missing in your message when you state or imply that sanctification is (not) a process of do's and don't's and should not be something Christians practice? I believe your answer lies somewhere in "...we hear the word of God and believe it and live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, are filled with the Spirit and dwell in love. " My question is: Is this not good works? On this earth, are we Christians not to do good deeds-works? Your comments on this would be greatly appreciated.

The Answer

- 1) We are created in Christ Jesus for good works. We are to do lots of them, good works are what God has made us for and He has prepared them beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)
- 2) However, we are not saved by good works. We are saved apart from good works, by grace through faith. (Ephesians 2:8,9)
- 3) The good works we are to do are defined as the commandments of Jesus Christ which are pretty well summarized in the Sermon On The Mount and in the various "one another" commands in the New Testament "love one another, forgive one another, be tender-hearted to one another, forbear one another etc.
- 4) The good works are not "religious" works involving priests, temples, sacrifices, offerings, feast days, oblations, special diets, vows, clean and unclean foods, taboos, don't handle, taste, touch etc. These religious works have all been fulfilled in Christ and there is no need for them to be performed any more, that entire system has passed away (see Galatians and especially Hebrews).
- 5) There can even be a clash between religious good works and true new creation good works. For instance if money needed for the family is given instead to religious uses and made Corban that is evil (Mark 7:6-13, 1 Timothy 5:8). (Mark 7:6-13 NKJV) He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their

lips, But their heart is far from Me. {7} And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' {8} "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men; the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." {9} He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. {10} "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' {11} "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban"; ' (that is, a gift to God), {12} "then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, {13} "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

(1 Timothy 5:8 NKJV) But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

6) True "New Creation" good works spring from faith working through love and are done in the power of the Holy Spirit. See the following almost identical verses in Galatians. (Galatians 5:6 NKJV) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love (Galatians 6:15 NKJV) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.

7) True "New Creation" good works are done without thought of the approval of men - including any approval by a religious hierarchy or Christian community. That is not to put down such communal expressions of faith but to limit them within their proper bounds. Approval is given in Christ, by grace, through faith and is called "justification" and is freely given by God. (John 5:44 NASB) "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?"

8) Being holy is not the same as "being very religious". Being holy just means being set apart to God and living a life that obeys His commandments - the one another commands, Sermon On The Mount etc. True holiness also means being unstained by the works of the flesh such as fornication, witchcraft etc (see Galatians 5:19-21). Being holy is not external piety such as having Christian bumper stickers, lots of bibles and going to church five times a week. You can do all that and be very unholy. Being holy is being loving and righteous and joyful and thankful in the Holy Spirit.

9) Being perfect is not the same as "being very religious". Being perfect is being perfected in love so you can even love your enemies. The perfect Christian is perfectly loving. (Matthew 5:43-48 NASB) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' {44} "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you {45} in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. {46} "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? {47} "And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? {48} "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

10) Unreligious people can still be perfect and holy and fulfill all the good works that God has created beforehand for them to do by having faith in Christ and loving their neighbor with perfect love in the power of the Holy Spirit. Life that is righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit is simple and uncomplicated - as Jesus said "my yoke is easy and my burden is light". Thus Christians do not have to do a long list of religious duties in order to make God happy. God has been happy with them since the day they were born-again and happily gives them some duties

in the Kingdom so they can demonstrate the love they have in their heart and be a blessing to their neighbor.

Repentance

(Matthew 3:1-2 NKJV) In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, {2} and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

(Matthew 4:17 NKJV) From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The first thing that the New Testament says about the Kingdom of Heaven is that repentance is required before entry. While entering the kingdom is free it is not without the cost of repentance. There needs to be the intention to change one's ways and to adopt the Kingdom lifestyle.

The kingdom is "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). It is a holy and happy place and it is only happy because it is first of all holy. Therefore those who wish to inherit the Kingdom must decide to quit with sin.

Repentance means to change one's mind, to decide on new thoughts, to move from a mind set on the flesh to a mind set on the Spirit. It means deciding on a distinct "about turn" in the direction of one's life and is often accompanied by contrition – the emotion of sorrow at sin. But repentance is a deeper thing than contrition, repentance is a decision of the whole person to change and involves the mind and will as well as the emotions.

True repentance bears fruit in a markedly changed life. When John the Baptist suspected hypocrisy among the Pharisees coming to his baptism he warned that an external repentance was insufficient:

(Matthew 3:7-12 NKJV) But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? {8} "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, {9} "and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. {10} "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. {11} "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. {12} "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

The "fruits of repentance" are the sweet things that naturally flow from a changed life under the control of Jesus Christ. They include self-control, patience, love, joy, forbearance of others, and just and righteous living. We see these fruits of repentance when we say "he has really changed" or "she is just a brand-new person". Above all they are the fruits of a new creation, of being born-again, made new from above.

The most essential fruits of repentance are forgiveness and mercy. If we have truly repented and truly received mercy and are deeply aware of the grace of God towards us then we will be accepting of others also and forgive them as Christ has forgiven us. Thus a truly repentant person is a soft, kind and merciful person full of joy and tenderness. Harsh legalism is a sign that true repentance has not taken place or has been long forgotten. The parable of the unjust,

unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 spells out that the person who seeks forgiveness but fails to give it is a fake and will not enter the Kingdom.

Also Jesus, in Matthew version of the Lord's Prayer says: (Matthew 6:12-15 NKJV) And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. {13} And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. {14} "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. {15} "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Let's pull this together. The Kingdom of Heaven is entered by broken, penitent sinners who know they are "poor in spirit", spiritual failures, and who are fully aware that they are in need of grace. Such people are soft, forgiving and tender-hearted, forgiving others as they themselves have been forgiven by Christ. They bear fruits in accordance with repentance and bubble with the joy of the Lord and the love of God demonstrating lives made new, and are clearly new creations of the Holy Spirit. They are not hard-hearted religionists like the Pharisees but spiritual, gentle, kind people full of good works and abounding in the graces of God. Their righteousness is a new kind of righteousness that flows from a repentant heart full of faith in Christ and the love of God and which fulfills the law by living in love.

The Will of God

(Matthew 7:21 NKJV) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

(Romans 10:13 NKJV) For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." At first these two verses seem to be in direct logical contradiction. Surely people saying "Lord, Lord" are calling upon the name of the Lord? Surely then they must be "saved" according to Romans 10:13? But Jesus declares that they are not saved unless they do the will of God? Is that "works salvation? This apparent contradiction flows from a common but very superficial reading of the text. The resolution is found in the nature and person of God.

You cannot fool God. Crying out "Lord, Lord" and putting on a religious appearance yet with no repentance and no intention of real obedience will not fool the Almighty and All-Knowing God. Faking salvation is not the same as "calling upon the name of the Lord", it is spiritual trickery.

Salvation is not a formula of words or a one-off prayer that guarantees eternal bliss and forever forgiveness if you spend five minutes with your head bowed before an obliging preacher. Madonna is said to have prayed such a prayer at one point along with quite a few other celebrities whose lives do not reflect the nature of Christ. Salvation is clearly conditional on real repentance which requires the genuine intention to live a changed and obedient life. Attempts to buy eternal security through good acting are doomed to failure.

Yet the truly penitent person is saved in an instant without the necessity of any good works. The penitent is saved just by calling on the name of the Lord. But once saved and made new and now born-again they will then go on to live the righteous and holy and changed life that is the fruit of their repentance.

A person who prays the prayer but does not live the life is probably not being truly penitent. If they truly wanted a changed life - why has this not occurred? Why are there no fruits of repentance? Why no evidence of a new nature? If there are no works it is likely that there is no spiritual life either. No works means that the spiritual life is probably dead, not moving, not quickened by the spiritual pulse of Christ within them. (James 2:26 NKJV) For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Let's look at the full context of our topic verse in Matthew 7:

(Matthew 7:15-29 NKJV) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. {16} "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? {17} "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. {18} "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. {19} "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. {20} "Therefore by their fruits you will know them. {21} "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. {22} "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' {23} "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' {24} "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: {25} "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. {26} "But everyone who

hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: {27} "and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall." {28} And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, {29} for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

The saved person is not a "ravenous wolf" with a greedy inner nature or a spiritual fake trotting out snake-oil and miracles for large donations. Rather they live an obedient life founded on the rock of diligent constructive doing of the commands of Christ. They regard Jesus as a true and relevant authority over them. That is what it means to have Jesus as Lord and to truly "call upon the name of the Lord".

The kingdom of Heaven cannot be entered by charm, con-artistry, salesmanship or good acting. The fake miracle-workers, junk exorcists and snake-oil salesmen with circus tents (or TV shows) and big offering bags can cry "Lord. Lord, Hallelujah" all they like but they will not make it into the Kingdom of Heaven. A ravenous and greedy nature cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

The humble penitent who desperately wants a changed life and cries out to God for salvation will be heard in an instant, forever and receive a new, imperishable heavenly nature from God. Such a person, who desires a righteous nature, will be saved. All of those who call on God to be made utterly new and live life the Jesus way - will be saved. And their new nature will show in new works and the fruits of repentance. By their fruits you will know them.

Persecution

(Matthew 10:28 NKJV) "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Why We Should Not Be Afraid

Persecution is a paradox - our enemies may kill us, but they can do us no harm! Luke puts the paradox very plainly: (Luke 21:16-18 NKJV) "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. {17} "And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. {18} "But not a hair of your head shall be lost. (They kill you..but not a hair of your head will be lost) see also 1 John 5;18,19. This is because God seems to have a "back-up copy" and you will be fully restored at the resurrection - down to the last hair on your head which is numbered! (Luke 12;7, Matthew 10:30)They might chop off your head, boil you in oil and burn you to ash but your every detail will be restored down to hair follicle number 345672 on the left temple in a glorious resurrection body!

Thus we are not to fear man because people cannot do us final and irrevocable spiritual harm: (Matthew 10:28-31 NKJV) "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. {29} "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. {30} "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. {31} "Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

We are not to fear "those who can kill the body". That is highly unnatural. If someone holds a bazooka to my head it would take a real infilling of the Holy Spirit and a new nature not to be afraid, but that is what Jesus asks of us. Jesus tells us not to be afraid of secret police, spies, torturers, executioners, corrupt police, burglars and terrorists. Rather we are to fearlessly obey the commandments of God under all circumstances. In the end we are on the winning side: (Revelation 11:15 NKJV) Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

And in the Millennium when this earth is regenerated and renewed we shall even have all our possessions restored a hundred fold: (Matthew 19:28-30 NKJV) So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. {29} "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. {30} "But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

How We Should Respond

While we are not to fear, we are to flee! (Matthew 10:23 NKJV) "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. ... (Matthew 24:16 NKJV) "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Even Jesus used discretion about where He ministered. (John 7:1 NKJV) saving His death until the right time ordained by God when He set His face like flint and went to Jerusalem. This is practical common-sense and meant for me that after a certain threat level was reached I moved from Mindanao to Manila.

We are to overcome our fear and our visceral "fight-or-flight" response by praying for those who persecute us, blessing them, doing them good and living out of a new and different nature that dwells in love. (Matthew 5:44-48 NKJV) "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, {45} "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. {46} "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? {47} "And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? {48} "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

We are not to react to them but rather to act upon them with spiritual authority and power. This does not mean that we are wimps, rather we may speak plainly and boldly as Jesus, Stephen and Paul did when facing their persecutors. Thus we are not to be violent or timid but spiritual and strong. (Luke 12:11-12 NKJV) "Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. {12} "For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."

Yet we are not to be Christian masochists but to avoid persecution where possible and to pray for our governments that we may be free from persecution and freely able to preach the gospel so that people can be saved: (1 Timothy 2:1-4 NKJV) Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, {2} for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. {3} For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, {4} who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Conclusion

The Kingdom of Heaven is in opposition to "the kingdoms of this world" over which it will eventually triumph. We are in a war and as effective "salt and light" Christians we face persecution. But the weapons of our warfare are not bombs and bullets but prayers and blessings, weapons that will pull down spiritual strongholds. (2 Cor 10:3-5) Persecution for righteousness sake (not for folly or criminality) is a sign that we have been considered worthy of the Kingdom, brings great eternal reward and helps us to grow into people whose love is perfected even to the love of one's enemies. Persecution cannot do us any final irrevocable harm and we will triumph over it in the end. Yet we are to be sensible and avoid it where possible and to pray to be able to live a godly and quiet life in all reverence.

Astonishing Faith, Ethnicity and the Kingdom of Heaven

(Matthew 8:5-13 NKJV) Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, {6} saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." {7} And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." {8} The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. {9} "For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." {10} When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! {11} "And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. {12} "But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." {13} Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour.

This story is one of astonishing faith, faith that caused even Jesus the Son of God to "marvel". The centurion intuitively understood the authority of Jesus Christ as Lord, that His authority was spiritual and verbal and active and living and capable of healing the centurion's servant even from a distance.

The faith of the centurion was humble "I am unworthy" and practical "But only speak a word and my servant will be healed". It was a faith that respectfully expected great things from God.

It was the faith of a Gentile. It was not sourced in heritage, tradition or answers learned by rote, it was faith that he would have arrived at while observing Jesus on his tour of duty of Palestine. As a Roman he probably originally worshipped Zeus. By now, however, the centurion was clear that Jesus was the source of spiritual authority. While there are no profound theological statements recorded it is clear that he saw Jesus Christ as Lord, and one as qualified to give orders in the spiritual realm and to heal disease.

Somewhere along the line the centurion had made a real spiritual discovery that caused him to truly trust Jesus in a medical emergency. And it was more than shamanistic dependence on a faith healer. It was real faith, that understood that Jesus did not have to wave a magic wand or cast a spell but that a simple word of authority would be sufficient.

This was not the second-hand, book-based faith of the scribes and Pharisees, the sort of faith that stitches bible verses together but never lives them out. This was a personal discovery capable of daily application and which saw answered prayer in the midst of real life. We need to "discover" what we already know! We need to have a real living operation faith, not just a set of pat answers to church questions.

The Jews, the natural "sons of the Kingdom" probably knew all the standard Sunday School answers and the names of the prophets and a few dozen (or more) key bible verses. But they were headed for outer darkness where there would be weeping and wailing and the gnashing of teeth. They had the knowing but not the believing, they knew what to say when asked but that did not live in them with any power and efficacy. Their servants were not healed, their world was

unchanged, they just went on being religious without really discovering it and believing it for themselves. We need to do more than believe that Jesus existed. We need to believe that He is powerful and authoritative and can command our circumstances to change. We need to believe that Jesus can really, truly just speak a word and miracles will happen. Jesus needs to step out of the history books and into the midst of our lives. And when we can do that we will have the real living faith that is part and parcel of being in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Itinerant Christian Ministry

(Matthew 10:5-15 NKJV) These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. {6} "But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. {7} "And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' {8} "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. {9} "Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, {10} "nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food. {11} "Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out. {12} "And when you go into a household, greet it. {13} "If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. {14} "And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. {15} "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!

This first ministry journey of the twelve contains many principles that are valid for "apostolic" styles of ministry today:

1. Go to a selected target group and go to the lost sheep not to the saved sheep
2. Keep moving - "as you go, preach".
3. Preach a clear and declarative gospel message.
4. Accompany the message with clear signs of the presence of the kingdom, including the miraculous.
5. Freely you have received freely give - ministry is not to be charged for.
6. The workers are to be free of financial concerns and are worthy of their food and basic necessities.
7. The gospel is to be preached to the worthy and righteous in the city and associated with those who are of moral standing.
8. The Christian worker is to bring peace and a blessing upon those he stays with and ministers to.
9. The Christian worker is to stay with the one family "until you go out" - not to be unstable in relationships with the community or choosy about accommodation.
10. There is to be a certain amount of finding out about the city "inquire in it who is worthy".
11. Receptivity is important. If the group is unreceptive and hostile, move on.
12. Rejection of the gospel proclaimed with power is not due to a poor messenger but to hard hearts. Thus the rejection of the messenger is the rejection of God and brings doom.

These are good instructions for itinerant ministries and indeed were adopted by the Franciscans and other medieval preaching orders. A well-targeted, mobilized, preaching ministry to the lost that offers the gospel freely while demonstrating Christ's power clearly in word and deed, and which builds good, wise relationships in the community and acts with financial integrity is going to be blessed.

Each of us probably has a part of the above verses which we like to emphasize. The evangelists will say "go to the lost sheep". The charismatic will say "heal the sick, cleanse the lepers", the Baptist will say "preach". The Franciscans will say "freely you have received freely give" and yet others might say "the worker is worthy of his food". However, we need to combine ALL these emphases if we are to have wise rules for itinerant ministry.

Jesus knew that the Jews were losing their window of opportunity for salvation, and that their nation would be obliterated in AD 70. They needed the gospel NOW. The Jews were the priority for reasons of theology and reasons of prophetic history. In slightly less than forty years the Jews would reject the gospel and lose their nation. By the very end of the book of Acts the gospel has officially moved from the Jews to Rome:

(Acts 28:25-28 NKJV) So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, {26} "saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive; {27} For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'" {28} "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!"

The Gentiles would have 2000 years to hear! So in this urgent window of time a certain people group (the Jews) is losing its chance to hear. Thus it becomes a ministry priority. Today this situation is particularly acute among the disappearing tribal peoples in the Amazon and in Papua New Guinea and inland China (who are often amazingly receptive to the gospel) and to the displaced urban poor in Asian mega-cities. In another 25 years many of these tribes will no longer exist or they will be changed beyond recognition. In another twenty-five years Asia's poor will have largely ceased the massive migration to the cities that makes them open to the gospel and the urban areas themselves will either have likely hardened into tough mean ghettos or undergone urban renewal and become middle-class and materialistic. There are some places that have evangelize NOW written all over them.

Other areas, such as North America, have heard until they are saturated. It now costs on average \$1.5 million to increase the US church by one baptized believer. Yet in many tribal areas and among the poor in urban areas of Asia and Africa it costs only one or two thousand dollars per additional baptized believer! Surely the cost effective priority for itinerant ministry should be among the most receptive peoples of the world?

One last comment. The evangelization of Muslims is a difficult issue as they clearly reject the proclamation of the gospel and we should perhaps be wiping the dust off our feet and moving on. Or should we? I sense that the time for Muslim evangelization has come. But we will only reach them with sacrificial love and the demonstration of spiritual power. I personally know of an area (which I cannot disclose) where a single healing miracle has led to over 100 Muslims becoming believers. When the Kingdom comes with power people believe!

Take a look at your ministry compared with Jesus' instructions above. What can you learn? What can you apply in your setting? How can you minister in a way that gives people a clear proclamation of the wonder of the Kingdom of Heaven?

The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven

(Matthew 13:11-17 NKJV) He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. {12} "For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. {13} "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. {14} "And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; {15} For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.' {16} "But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; {17} "for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven are matters of spiritual perception. There are those that "get it" and those that have no understanding. Those that see and those that are blind, those that hear and those who are spiritually deaf. This perception is a grace gift from God. "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. {12} "For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.

Does this mean that God destines some people to perpetual spiritual obscurity? Not really. rather we are all blinded by our sin, but God opens the eyes of a few. Understanding spiritual things is His gift, and His to bestow. We cause our own blindness, demanding that God fit our expectations, that He speak on our terms and fit our preoccupations. Or maybe we just aren't looking, and have our focus on this world with its money, sex or power.

We are not talking here about the ability to see demons and angels or have dreams and visions. Many occult practitioners understand those things but are far from Christ. This is a deeper work - the ability to grasp the structural categories of the Kingdom and how it works, the ability to be in tune with the mind of God. These are not magical mysteries, rather they are heavenly truths that are so unusual that few can truly grasp them. One of the Greek words that describes the human mind is *phronema* - the structure and framework of thought, the world-view. When Paul says "but we have the mind of Christ" this is the word he uses.

Christians have a mental framework that God's truths can fit into. Their mind is the right way up and its categories are suited to scriptural truth. It's like a child's peg-board with big plastic squares and triangles, circles and hexagons. Think of truth perhaps as a square, love as a circle, justice as a triangle and so on. At the fall the peg-board is twisted and broken and the squares and circles no longer fit in, we just don't understand love and justice and mercy. With redemption and the renewal of the mind the pegboard is straightened up so the pieces can now be pushed into place and spiritual truth is easily absorbed. The Bible which was once confusing is now a delight.

The mysteries are only really grasped when the human mind is under the influence of that great interpreter of mysteries the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that inspired the prophets and wrote the Scriptures and hovered over the waters at creation. It is His job to "teach us all things" (1

John 2:20-27), instruct us about Christ (John 14:26) and reveal to us the unimaginable glories that God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9-16). Without the Holy Spirit spiritual truths just seem as "foolishness" to the natural man (1 Corinthians 2:13,14).

To people who love God and melt under the influence of the Holy Spirit, more and more is revealed. They are "teachable", so they are taught. But the proud, obstinate, unbelieving and hard of heart who resist the Holy Spirit as Stephens' persecutors did (Acts 7:51) just go deeper into their darkness. This seeing with the heart, this grasping of spiritual things was apparently at a low ebb in Jesus' day." For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed". So low had they gone that Jesus simply did not bother to teach many of them and seems to have avoided some major wealthy Galilean cities like Herodias and Sepphoris to concentrate on the receptive poor and to preach and teach in the countryside where people had to go out to see Him. Jesus told intriguing stories so that those who the Holy Spirit was working in would ask for me and those who were hard of heart would just walk away. The parables and the mysteries of the kingdom acted as a filter, sorting out the truth seekers from the sign seekers.

But the parables were more than just tough spiritual puzzles for disciples - like Zen koans, that are simply there to expand the mind but are devoid of any real content. The parables were also truth. The parables were precious and glorious and still are. "But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; {17} "for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." The parables change our natural en-cultured modes of thought as we find out about the first being last, serving to lead and how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. They point us to an internal religion of the heart and of humble repentance before a gracious God and the parables abolish external rituals and respectabilities. They leave no room for human pride and in doings so they invert our thinking and flip it around so it becomes "right side up". Now ask God the Holy Spirit to show you the "mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven".

The Wheat and the Tares

(Matthew 13:24-30 NKJV) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; {25} "but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. {26} "But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. {27} "So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' {28} "He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' {29} "But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. {30} 'Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."

The difference between "the kingdom of Heaven" and "Heaven" is well illustrated here. The kingdom of heaven is subject to enemies and to demonic infiltration, whereas Heaven itself would oust such intruders in a moment. The Kingdom of Heaven is meant to be occupied by true believers, all sincere and obedient followers of Jesus Christ. But the Devil is too smart to allow such a perfect community to exist. He sowed Judas among the Twelve, put lies in the heart of Annanias and Sapphira and has infiltrated the church with false apostles, false teachers, and false brethren.

When do these tares get sown into the Kingdom? When we are at ease, and without alertness. The parable simply says the deed was done "while men slept". Churches can become sleepy and dull, unguarded and naive and their doctrines can be altered almost imperceptibly. Churches that are vigorous and biblical, that are awake to Satan's schemes and which insist on members being truly born-again are in little danger of being full of tares.

Perhaps the greatest sowing of tares happened in the centuries following 313 AD when Constantine was converted and the church was legitimized, persecution ceased and the cost of being a Christian was low indeed. Evil men paid no price for their place in the kingdom of heaven and they flocked to its status bringing many pagan practices and wrong beliefs. Satan also sows tares at critical points in church growth and history - following or in the midst of revivals and in key areas of influence on doctrine and practice. This very successful strategy has often brought great weakness to the Church - sometimes for centuries.

Why then, wondered the servants/angels, are not these impostors immediately removed by God? "The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?'. Looking at the huge horror patches in Church History we can only agree with the angels! Why has God not dealt more harshly with false teachers? After all "their doom is sure" (see Jude and 2 Peter). The answer is that the process of removal is so traumatic that it will utterly destabilize and uproot the faith of some saints. For a single precious, eternal saint to be lost, or destroyed in their faith, is so abhorrent to God, that He will put up with a thousand heretics.

But notice God's removal strategy "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them,". The bundling up of the tares means that the tares will clump together and associate in distinct groups prior to the day of judgment. This will give rise to the "bundles of heretics" which we call cults. It is my opinion that the current rash of cult activity may very well be partly the work of the angels, bundling together the tares as the first step to the purifying fire of the last days.

If this is so then we are close to the "time of harvest" and eventually God will gather the wheat into His barn, and form the perfect, pure and unsullied Christian community, free from false beliefs and practice. Until then we will have imperfect churches, sometimes with large numbers of tares within them. And when we do find a good church we need to keep it that way, aware that Satan is utterly opposed to a fully functioning, holy, loving, merciful and doctrinally pure Christian community. On the other hand we need to be kind and careful in our weeding out of the tares, brutal Inquisitions do more harm than good. We must just encourage the tares to leave and form their own "bundles".

Paul says such divisions are an unfortunate necessity: (1 Corinthians 11:19 NKJV) For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." And the apostle John talks about these defections: (1 John 2:18-20 NKJV) Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. {19} They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. {20} But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.

One thing that the parable may be saying is that despite the surface similarity there is a deep genetic difference between wheat and tares. Tares simply cannot be converted into wheat. They are not changed, they do not repent, they are burned. This is especially true of the leaders - the false apostles, false prophets and false teachers. The overwhelming impression in the New Testament is that false prophets are irredeemable sons of perdition - and utterly doomed and that their followers can only be saved "as through fire". (2 Peter 2:1-3 NKJV) But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. {2} And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. {3} By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

The only cult I know that has come back on track is the World-Wide Church of God where the whole leadership realized they were wrong and changed course. Its adherence to the Scriptures gradually brought this group back on track. This intractability of the cults, and the deep and willful perversity that runs through them makes them difficult to evangelize and there are very few conversions from cults to Christ. Also exiting a cult is traumatic, and few make it out with an intact faith. But there are some - such as Augustine, who was converted from the Manichees to Christ and later became the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. His secret? Monica, his mother was a woman of prayer and spiritual warfare. For some articles of mine on cults see:

<http://www.aibi.ph/cults/>.

The Mustard Seed

(Matthew 13:31-32 NKJV) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, {32} "which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

(Mark 4:30-32 NKJV) Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? {31} "It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; {32} "but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

(Luke 13:18-19 NKJV) Then He said, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? {19} "It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches."

(Matthew 17:20 NKJV) So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

(Luke 17:6 NKJV) So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

The "mustard seed" is the small insignificant thing that gains the attention of Christ "the Man" so that He plants it on His field or in His garden, and even though it is "the least" because it is the seed of faith and part of the Kingdom of Heaven, it becomes mighty, shoots forth, has many branches and is a mighty blessing.

There are many mustard-seeds in the natural world that bear no fruit. They end up blown by the wind or ground up in the mustard pot. But this tiny mustard seed is chosen. It is picked up. It is carried, it is planted and it grows. It is not a different kind of mustard seed with special powers. It is an average, ordinary garden-variety mustard seed. But it is simply the one chosen to be sown in the field or tended in the garden - and it grows from the life that is within it, tended by the care of God.

A mustard-seed ministry is a small ministry of great faith and spiritual life that is chosen by God to receive His care and become great, a church with many branches, a mission that "shoots forth". All such growth is from God. (1 Corinthians 3). A ministry is not necessarily a "mustard-seed" because it is small. Some ministries are small because they are unbelieving or mismanaged. It's not the smallness, it's the life, the faith, the living quickness. And mustard-seed ministries do not remain small for long. They grow, they flourish, they send forth their shoots. The parable of the mustard-seed does not teach that "small is beautiful" rather it teaches that "mighty growth comes from living faith". The seed does not stay small, it becomes huge.

The mustard-seed tells us that God can regard that which is seemingly small and unimportant as long as it has potential for growth and is alive and full of faith. Four wet young men, praying in a haystack during a thunderstorm started a might revival in the USA. A German monk with a

few ideas about Romans started the Reformation. A tiny Albanian nun from an atheist country became Mother Teresa and founded a whole order. The kingdom of heaven mustard-seeds are in fact spiritual dynamite. Countless ministries come and go without being mustard-seeds. They sputter along with a few offices, struggle for funds, and end in a quarrel. They don't really have the Kingdom life, or they lose it early on. On the other hand mustard-seed ministries have powerful prayer meetings and the "zing" of real faith.

Above all else mustard-seed ministries are God's idea not man's idea. They are the seed He picks up and plants. They flow from His vision and calling and those in them know that this is not just a program or a good idea or even "meeting a need" but something birthed in God and by God and for God. Church A might become large so one day the pastor says 'we are large now, we should plant another church because that is what big churches do'. I can practically guarantee that church-plant will struggle because it's birthed in one man's concept alone. On the other church B is in prayer and the leaders say "I think God is calling us to plant a church in Xtown and he wants Bill to lead it." That is much more likely to succeed. It stands a very good chance of being a true mustard-seed ministry because it is birthed in a word from God heard by many leaders together. Jesus only did "what He saw His Father doing". He moved at God's initiative, not according to His own philosophy. If that is true of our Lord, it should also be true of us.

Mustard-seed ministries have mustard-seed faith and know that nothing is impossible with God. To put it another way mustard-seed ministries know that God loves them and blesses them and are confident of His grace upon them and are certain that they "have all the luck they need". Let me explain that last phrase. Here in the Philippines nearly all success is attributed to luck and many use magic charms and have lucky numbers etc. However, as I have reflected on that I have seen that this means they do not understand justification. Let me elucidate...

Justification means that the God who made heaven, and earth and the seas and everything in them, now loves me with an everlasting love and that I am precious in His sight, that far from being condemned I am shown grace upon grace, that He who gave us His Son will, with Him give me all things and bestows all favor upon me and blesses me with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms (Hebrews 1:3). Since the very Creator loves me passionately I do not need the favor of an idol, a spirit or a charm. The one with all the power in Heaven and on Earth loves me very dearly and should I need a storm-stilled, a mountain moved or a mulberry tree cast into the sea He will be more than happy to oblige. Just this evening I was in a prayer meeting with a friend who raised her daughter from the dead after she had been drowned for 2 hours then resuscitated another in the hospital! These sort of people have one thing in common, they are absolutely totally sure that God loves them enough to move heaven and earth on their behalf, even though they are just ordinary garden-variety mustard seeds.

Thus faith and love replace luck as the source of hope for Christians. Mustard-seed people know that the Universe is not a roulette wheel or a machine but a place ordered by a God who "works all things together for good to those who love Him". When you believe Romans 8:28 and John 1 and believe you are talking to the God whose hands are on the levers of Creation then you can ask for a mountain to be moved or a mulberry tree uprooted or a breakthrough in your ministry and you will receive it. However, if you are uncertain that God really loves you, if you think that He is not interested in making your joy full, if you doubt that He wants to bless you and reward you a hundredfold and grant you all good things or if you think your sin can deflect His love, or in fact has deflected it, that the cross has not really dealt with it once and for all time, then you will receive little or nothing. You will resort to programs, you will seek luck, you will

follow trends, you may even read the stars! You will run in small anxious circles because you do not believe.

If you feel that you do not yet have the quick, living faith of the mustard-seed believers who have grasped the glory and grace of the Kingdom of Heaven then I suggest you read right through the New Testament underling every indication of God's love and every promise you can claim. Think on these things until they give birth to faith in your heart, for faith comes through hearing the word of Christ.

The Parable of the Leaven

(Darby) He spoke another parable to them: The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it had been all leavened.

The way the term leaven is used here is highly unusual. In the OT "leaven" was always used as a negative metaphor for contagion - particularly the contagious nature of sin. Jesus even used it this way when He spoke about the contagious legalism of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:6-12). Leaven was that which was fermenting, contagious, sinister, defiling. In the Old Testament if the clean touched the unclean - then it become unclean, but the reverse was not also true. Sin was contagious but holiness was contained (Haggai 2:11-13). Thus the unclean could change the clean, but the clean could never purify the unclean. Sin could work its way through a community and ruin it, but righteousness could never spread like that. It had to be guarded from contamination at all costs. A little leaven was dangerous and could ruin "the whole lump".

But this is turned upside down in the Gospels where the Kingdom of the Heavens is incorruptible and when the clean touched the unclean then purity resulted! For instance in the OT if a priest touched a leper then he was defiled and unable to perform his duties. However, when Jesus touched a leper He was not defiled, for He is incorruptible, rather the leper became clean. In the OT if anyone touched a dead body, they were unclean, but when Jesus touched a dead body, He was not defiled, rather that person rose from the dead.

The Pharisees went to great lengths to avoid defilement, to not touch leaven, to be pure by separation from all defiling things. But Jesus went and sought out the most unclean and defiling people - the lepers, the woman with the issue of blood, the prostitutes, the tax-gatherers, the Gentile soldiers contaminated twice by race and contact with death, the Samaritan woman, and sinners, drunkards and the gluttons. He willingly plunged into their midst ate, with them, drank with them, healed them and called them to repentance and transformed their lives. Jesus was never defiled, never corrupted, never made unholy by them. They did not defile Him. Rather He transformed them! Jesus could turn being touched by a distraught prostitute into a moment of grace.

Leaven is all about intimate close contact. It's put right inside, it's mixed in, it's hidden, it's intimate in the closest way with the flour and in that close contact, in that mixing, it leavens the whole loaf. In the OT view where ritual purity was a very important issue intimate close contact was spiritually dangerous "you could catch something", impurity could "accidentally" pass along to you from a menstruating woman, a dead body, even touching a dead lizard defiled you until evening. You had to watch your step and not get too close to anything or anyone. But Jesus got intimate with a sinful world, taking on the likeness of sinful flesh and living and dying amongst sinful people. Jesus died in disgrace, executed by Gentiles, on a cross, between two thieves and even this did not defile and destroy Him but became our purification.

The Kingdom of God is leaven turned upside down. It's the holy transforming the unholy - impossible by OT standards but possible with God. It means Mother Teresa can minister to lepers and Calcutta and come out a saint. It means you can minister among gangs and street kids and prostitutes and remain pure. The Kingdom leaven wins. Kingdom purity is indestructible. It means intimacy with sinners is spiritually safe. You can love a drug addict and still be a good Christian, you can be married to an alcoholic (though I don't recommend it) and the Holy Spirit will not desert you.

While we can minister fearlessly knowing that no food, no substance, no person can defile us we still need to exercise some caution. Particularly around the powerful and the respectable! The only place a Christian can be defiled is in their own spirit. When leaven is used in its negative sense in the NT it refers to hypocrisy (literally acting, using masks), (Luke 12:1, Matthew 16:6-13), licentiousness (1 Corinthians 5:6-8), and the teaching of the Judaizers in Galatia (Galatians 5:8). These are the sins of the spirit. They are contaminating attitudes that must be uprooted from the Christian community. But most of these wrong attitudes are spread by the "respectable and powerful" (Mark 8:15) not by the sinners!

The parable of the leaven says that transformational Christians do not stay separate - but get intimate. The salt does not stay in the salt shaker (but neither should it lose its savor)! Christians can be truly international in their ministry without fear of contamination. You can go into a bar without losing any measure of holiness - providing you are holy in attitude. You can be like Floyd McLung and live in the red light district of Amsterdam and be Kingdom Leaven there. You can dwell in gay districts in Sydney or St. Francisco and carry out AIDS ministry and Jesus will be there right beside you. There is no reason to fear sinners.

A Pharisee being touched by a prostitute would experience extreme discomfort and spiritual panic. But Jesus was relaxed and gave out grace not fear. How do you react around "extreme sinners"? Do you freeze up and run, or can you cope with being leaven? Do you have grace and acceptance for them or just fear and rejection? Are you confident that if you plunge into this messy world that it will be the one transformed - and that your spiritual purity is indestructible? Yes, you do need to guard your heart and your teaching and stay salty, but that is no reason for rejecting people. You can be leaven, you can get mixed up with this hurting world and change it. For yours is the indestructibly pure and incorruptible, Kingdom of Heaven.

1 Peter 1:3-4 ASV Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (4) unto an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.

The Treasure in the Field

(Matthew 13:44 NKJV) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Here in the Philippines treasure-hunting is a national past-time especially the hunt for a vast store of Japanese gold known as "Yamashita's treasure". Legend has it that during WW2 General Yamashita amassed a huge hoard of gold that he had to leave in the Philippines after his defeat by the Allies. This legend has seen thousands of treasure seekers come here and even given rise to a National Geographic TV special called "Yamashita's Gold".

These treasure-seekers mount huge and costly expeditions, run out of money, and go home – often without finding even a single gold bar. Small treasure finds here and there and bogus maps written in Japanese keep the industry going. Hope springs eternal among the seekers of Yamashita's gold. This is because people think that gold is something worth searching for, and putting great effort into. The treasure is worth "giving all" for.

There is a constant theme in the Gospels - that the Kingdom is something we should "give all for". It comes up here and in the next parable - about the pearl of great price. The story of the rich young ruler, the call of the disciples and in Peter's observation "Lord we have given up all to follow you". Most of all it becomes clear in the cross. Jesus "gave up all for us so that we might give up all for Him. But it's not just giving up - there is a bountiful receiving, Peter gets a hundredfold, the rich young ruler would have got treasure in Heaven, the man finds a hidden treasure, the merchant gets the pearl, and Jesus gets "the name that is above every name" ((Philippians 2:5-11).

It's never sacrifice just for the sake of sacrifice. There is always an abundant reward and they "go home rejoicing". In the end it is always "worth it". Thus the Christian faith is neither ascetic or masochistically sacrificial, in fact Jesus put an end to sacrifice! The cry of the Christian is "Abba, father" not "more pain please". Christians rejoice in their sufferings - because properly endured they will bring a great reward, not because pain itself is desirable. In fact in Heaven there will be "no more crying, or sorrow, or pain".

Yet while the Kingdom is indeed "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17) it does have a short-term cost, it is the "narrow gate" and we may have to "give all" in the short-term in order to rejoice in the long-term. Jesus, "for the joy set before Him" endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2). So we have the equation "sell all you have and give" = "and you shall have treasure in heaven". First the high cost, then the abundant reward.

Now the pain does not "earn" the reward. The sheer effort of digging does not "earn" the treasure as a wage, rather digging is simply the means of discovering a huge gracious bounty. There is no correlation between effort and reward. Some may dig only a few feet and find a million dollar, others may search for years and find nothing. The treasure is always "a find", a "discovery" not a wage. The Kingdom is always of grace, but sometimes grace must be searched out.

Modern Christians want grace on a plate. There is little sense of having to search and dig and diligently uncover grace. Few people put real effort into reading the Bible, studying theology,

travailing in prayer or persisting in good works. The same people who will excitedly line up for an hour for a sale at Christmas will consider it tedious to read three chapters of Scripture.

We need to get excited about our faith and to treasure it, to seek Christ with diligence and to dig for grace and truth. The whole idea of Christ as a priceless treasure and of the enormous value of our heavenly reward has been disparaged by the "cultured despisers" of Christianity and we have believed them! We have lost the deeper reaches of grace because they require earnest seeking and we have no concept that such costly seeking has any real value. After all "we are saved". Saved yes, but poverty-stricken in spiritual terms. In this light I'll end this study by quoting what Jesus said about the need of the Laodiceans to "buy gold refined by fire":

(Revelation 3:14-22 NKJV) "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: {15} "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. {16} "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. {17} "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'; and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked; {18} "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. {19} "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. {20} "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. {21} "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. {22} "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

The Pearl of Great Price

(Matthew 13:45-46 NKJV) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, {46} "who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. The pearl merchant is a person who knows good value when he sees it. This is no sentimental shopper, nor is this a Hollywood starlet buying jewelry. This is a merchant whose job is the buying and selling of beautiful pearls. And he sees a pearl so astounding, so beautiful, that it puts the rest of his inventory to shame. It is also the pearl that will make him rich. It's the "opportunity of a lifetime", the chance to buy the Cullinor Diamond or have a Rembrandt in the gallery. People will come hundreds of miles just to buy this one pearl and the bidding war will be intense. He has the choice to keep on selling good pearls, or risk everything on one "great" pearl.

The merchant knows what he must do and liquidates his entire inventory and rushes out to buy the pearl of great price. His stock in everything else, his insurance policies, his side-bets, are all cashed in because of his utter certainty that he has found something so astounding that he must have it. Jesus is so grand, and the kingdom of heaven so valuable and so certain that we can cash in all our "side-bets" in life. We don't need anything else. It's not "Jesus and..." but "Jesus is enough".

Now there were probably dozens of other pearl merchants out there, looking at the pearl of great price, and "wishing". But in their minds they can't make the "leap of faith", they think "not this month", "not if it means cashing in other inventory...", "who will buy it". Living by faith in Jesus Christ is not for those who like playing it safe. If Bill Gates sold two billion dollars worth of shares just to own the Cullinor Diamond we might think him insane. Until he sold it for five billion dollars ten years later. Art collectors, prime real estate, top jewelry, all take time to mature as investments - but pay a handsome dividend in the end. So it is with our faith.

There are those who sell their house and car and go to bible college and perhaps to the mission field. They are selling all for the "pearl of great price". But when that Day comes their "investment" will pay much greater dividends than those who played it safe in life. The Pearl will give a good return. Jesus wants you to see Him as valuable. He wants you to treasure Him. He wants you to demonstrate that His Kingdom matters to you and that you will make sacrifices to know Him and to inherit eternal life.

Love demands sacrifice and our sense of worth is built when others willingly sacrifice a little for us. Blessed are the children who grow up seeing their parents make sacrifices for them. Such children know they are valuable to their parents and are certain they are loved by them. But woe to the children whose parents are stingy and selfish, who never sacrifice for their children, never attend their games, never go out of the way for the children but expect the children to sacrifice for them. Such children grow up feeling worthless and unloved.

When I cancel appointments to be with my wife on some occasion she glows with love. My wife knows how much I value her by the amount I am willing to "give up" for her in daily life. And so it is with God. He knows how much we value the death of His Son, and the kingdom we will inherit, by how much we will give up for it. The "sacrifices" I make for my wife pay dividends a hundred times over - how much more the sacrifices we make for God? He is the Pearl of Great Price, His kingdom is worth entering into and sacrificing for.

You will be slighting God if His service is less important than your own convenience. If President Bush sent you as Ambassador for the USA to Pakistan would you go? But if the King of Kings sent you as an ambassador for Christ to Pakistan - would you go? Is the astounding worth of Kingdom of God a reality in your life? The martyrs show us that Jesus is even worth more than life itself. While God seldom demands sacrifice, God is worth making sacrifices for.

Think about the sacrifices you may need to make to fully obey God. The sacrifice of being humble when rebuked or annoyed. The sacrifice of giving to church or missions. The sacrifice of time set aside for the work of the Lord. The sacrifice of going to Bible College or the sacrifice of living in an "undesirable" area so as to minister Christ and follow His calling. Or giving up your favorite TV program to spend time helping the poor. If one day you were faced with the merchant's choice - where you had to give up everything, for the one pearl of great price, for the kingdom of heaven - could you/ Would you? Is the kingdom of Heaven precious in your sight?

The Dragnet

(Matthew 13:47-50 NKJV) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, {48} "which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. {49} "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, {50} "and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

(Matthew 7:15-23 NKJV) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. {16} "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? {17} "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. {18} "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. {19} "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. {20} "Therefore by their fruits you will know them. {21} "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. {22} "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' {23} "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

The kingdom of heaven is a two stage redemptive process. The kingdom temporarily permits an invasion of the evil (Matthew 11:11-13), a planting of the tares, the catching of bad fish. This mixture of good and evil is then sorted out by the angels at the end of the age. In this present age the kingdom of heaven is impure. This is the time of growth and harvest, but in the time of reaping, in the time the dragnet will be pulled in, then the kingdom of heaven will be purified.

The image of the dragnet is used in Habakkuk to describe the terrible indiscriminate slaughter of the Babylonians: (Habakkuk 1:14-17 NKJV) Why do You make men like fish of the sea, Like creeping things that have no ruler over them? {15} They take up all of them with a hook, They catch them in their net, And gather them in their dragnet. Therefore they rejoice and are glad. {16} Therefore they sacrifice to their net, And burn incense to their dragnet; Because by them their share is sumptuous And their food plentiful. {17} Shall they therefore empty their net, And continue to slay nations without pity?

The dragnet is the indiscriminate catch-all. It treats all alike, rich and poor, slave and free, high and low, they are all caught in the net. The Church catches all nations, all types of people - and this is good and positive, because in the Kingdom being rich or poor, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, is of absolutely no consequence. In the end the whole pile of world-wide humanity (the nations of Habakkuk 1:17) is sorted into just two piles - the righteous - who are gathered up into vessels, and the wicked - who are cast into eternal fire.

Thus Jesus is saying that the church in its present diverse "catch-all" indiscriminate form is the ante-room of eternity, not the final destination. It's the boat where the fish are caught, not the landing stage where they are sorted out. Jesus is also saying that despite the apparent diversity the church is only ultimately composed of two types of people - good guys and bad guys, white hats and black hats, good fish and bad fish, good fruits or bad fruits, the righteous and the wicked, the sheep and the goats, people who inherit eternal life or people who are tormented forever. It's a stark, eternal, utterly binary division. In the same pew at church are people of eternal glory and people who will become an eternal horror. Many of these will protest their

eternal destiny, arrogantly sure of their own salvation while actually being "workers of iniquity". (Matthew 7:15-23)

The good fish are separated from the bad fish on the basis of their manifest behavior which indicates the kind of life that dwells within them. If a person really possesses eternal life then the good life will show in "good fruit" - good deeds done in righteousness. They will act like the "sheep" in Matthew 25, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, being kind to the poor etc. Their new life, the new creation in them, will shine through in way they live. The good tree - the inner nature, the born-again by grace through faith person, will do good works as a natural result of the life of Christ within them. (Ephesians 2:8-10 NKJV) For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, {9} not of works, lest anyone should boast. {10} For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

On the other hand, the wicked show their inner nature by producing "bad fruit", working iniquity, neglecting those in need and acting like the stunned "goats" of Matthew 25 who seem to have only lived for themselves. Most wicked people disguise their "wolfish" agenda (Matt 7:15) because it is socially unacceptable. They are frequently hypocrites - literally "actors" who put on a show for others, and such people like to live "on stage". But no matter how good their performance is the fruit tastes funny, it's bad fruit and they are bad fish. Underneath people sense that the wicked are selfish and predatory, and though they may fool us they cannot fool God or the angels and in the end they will be utterly rejected.

The mixed-up state of the church is not unknown to God and he will quite literally "sort it out". We won't have to tolerate the wicked in the kingdom of heaven forever. But on this side of things this mixture of good and evil can be very confusing! In the midst of the heresies and confusion in the first century church Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy: (2 Timothy 2:15-19 NKJV) Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. {16} But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. {17} And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, {18} who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some. {19} Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

While we dwell in this age, "in the dragnet" and the church contains heretics such as Hymenaeus and Philetus and good teachers like Paul and Timothy how are we to react? Paul recommends four things: First, teach the truth, rightly dividing the Scriptures. Secondly, reject the rubbish, having nothing to do with fables and idle babbling. Thirdly, trust God to know those who are His. Don't try and sort people out ourselves, we don't need to tell the Omniscient One who is in and who is out. Lastly we are not to be smug or casual about our salvation but to depart from iniquity ourselves and to live holy lives consistent with the name of Christ. Thus true Christians combine right doctrine and right living with a humble avoidance of error and iniquity.

Finally, this parable should put to rest two false ideas of salvation. The first wrong idea is that all church-members are saved, that all who turn up at church also turn up in heaven. It is quite clear from this parable that more are in the dragnet, the present form of kingdom, than will end up with God in heaven. In fact many church members will be cast out. In Matthew 7:21-23 many professing Christians who claim to do miracles in Christ's name will be cast out. Church membership, even active church membership is no guarantee of salvation. You need to be righteous - with the righteousness of Christ. Secondly, it puts paid to the idea of universal

salvation - that everyone gets in, even unbelievers, because all were saved by Christ's death on the cross. If this was so then who are those Jesus speaks of "at the end of the age" - the wicked, the hypocrites and those cast into eternal hellfire? Who are those that weep and wail and gnash their teeth at their terrible fate? Jesus is not speaking of an abstract principle here. It is real men and women who will face judgment. The dragnet may be indiscriminate but the angels will be careful in their sorting out. The unrepentant wicked do not make it into the final and eternal kingdom of God.

The Well-Instructed Scribe

(Matthew 13:52 NKJV) Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."

The bible-teachers (scribes) who understand the Kingdom of the Heavens have an inexhaustible treasure of truths, both new and old. The "new truths" are the truths concerning Christ, the Church, the New Testament and God's revelations for today. The old truths are the nature of God, Creation, providence, basic morality, Proverbs and the unchanging nature of righteousness, holiness and grace.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not a fad, it is an eternal realm that has existed since before the mountains were born and the hills were brought forth and is working out like leaven in the world today and which will be consummated at the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore Kingdom scribes draw on truths both ancient and modern.

Christians should live in four time periods - eternity, the cross, today and the prophetic future. We cannot just focus totally on current events and politics and morality, nor can we focus just of future prophecy, or just on the cross, salvation and the early church, or solely on the timeless God of eternity. We must embrace the God who was and is and is to come and teach treasures "new and old"

Firstly, we should soak our minds in eternal truths, many of which are found in the Old Testament theological passages such as Deuteronomy, Psalms and Isaiah. We need to ground ourselves in truths such as: (Isaiah 45:18 NKJV) For thus says the LORD, Who created the heavens, Who is God, Who formed the earth and made it, Who has established it, Who did not create it in vain, Who formed it to be inhabited: "I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Secondly, we need to take people to the cross, so that for every single Christian redemption is clear and present and understood and the love of Christ and the opportunity for salvation is portrayed clearly. We also need to live in the outworking of redemption, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the dynamics of the early church.

Thirdly, we need to live in today, and help our people in the midst of the struggles of work and family and the challenges of technology. We need to have a faith that applies Scriptural truth in the daily landscape of our lives and which can keep teaching relevant to the real world around us.

Fourthly, we need to give people confidence that God has a plan that He is working out in history. We need to teach prophecy and show that indeed God is working out all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Bible-teachers instructed in the kingdom of Heaven have "fresh oil" and do not just recite old traditions. On the other hand they do not just chase after fads or follow trends. They are also grounded in the deep, old truths, the ancient paths. They are not shallow, foolish or easily misled, their minds grasp the great truths that God has built upon from Genesis all the way through to Revelation. They do not hastily invent new doctrines, nor are they mired in things learned by rote. They have present experiences of God the Holy Spirit and daily inspiration and

openings of the Word. But in these they do not depart from Scripture or contradict God's eternal truths. The new is based on the old and is consistent with it.

C.S. Lewis used to talk about "chronological snobbery" and our tendency to think any idea that is more than ten years old is "hopelessly out of date". That leads to repeating old mistakes, to ignorance and to folly. There is a wonderful humility that comes as we study history and realize that previous generations have a lot to offer.

Have a look at your teaching - How long is it since you taught God's eternal truths from the OT? Or took people to the cross? Or tackled contemporary issues? Or assured people of God's future plans for our planet? Is your ministry stuck in one or two aspects of time or genres of biblical literature? Are you running after only the latest authors and never touching the desert Fathers? Is your treasure full of things new and old? - You have the whole Kingdom of Heaven to teach...

The Keys Of the Kingdom

The following Scriptures refer to the "keys" and their function of opening and shutting, binding and loosing and the proper use of spiritual authority.

(Matthew 16:17-19 NKJV) Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. {18 } "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. {19 } "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

(Matthew 18:18-19 NKJV) "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. {19 } "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.

(Luke 11:52 NKJV) "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered."

(Luke 13:12 NKJV) But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity."

(John 11:44 NKJV) And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."

(Acts 2:23-24 NKJV) "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; {24 } "whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

(Revelation 1:18 NKJV) "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.

(Revelation 3:7-8 NKJV) "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things says He who is holy, He who is true, "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens": {8 } "I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

(Revelation 9:1-2 NKJV) Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit. {2} And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. So the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit.

(Revelation 20:1-3 NKJV) Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. {2 } He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; {3 } and he cast him into the

bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

Keys represent the ability to lock up (to bind) and the ability to let out (to loose). If I have the keys to a jail I can use them to lock up a dangerous prisoner or to release a pardoned inmate. The key to the bottomless pit is used twice, once to release demonic horde of locusts, and secondly, to confine Satan for one thousand years.

Also keys denote access and control. With the keys one can control movement, times of access and who and what goes in and out. This then controls other activities. The keys to a bank vault with a time lock means that at certain seasons the bank manager can unlock the cash and the tellers will have something to give customers. This is the "key of David" in the sense of the Davidic dynasty, which was something that God opened that no man could shut. This is the key to opportunity, times and seasons.

Keys also denote power and authority. The one with the keys has control. Jesus has the keys of Hades and of Death. He has complete authority over who goes in and out. Death has been taken out of the Devil's control and is now in Jesus power and its captives have been set free. (Hebrews 2:14-15 NKJV) Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, {15 } and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Keys also denote our ability to explore and discover, to find a treasure or to leave it unaccessed. It is this sense that Jesus uses when He speaks of "the keys of knowledge" that the scribes took away, thus not entering themselves and hindering others. (Luke 11:52 NKJV) "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered." By discarding the real spiritual truths and teaching the "doctrines of men" they left their audience without the keys to the spiritual life and its treasures.

Now we come to one of the most disputed verses in Scripture - Matthew 16: 19 where Jesus gives Peter the "keys of the Kingdom" with the clear implication that Peter's earthly actions would somehow either lock up heaven or release things from Heaven. When Peter allowed the Gentiles into the Church on an equal footing with Jews (Acts 10,11 and 15) he was using His keys to let people into the Kingdom. On the other hand Peter's stern judgment on Annanias and Sapphira seems to have been using the keys to bind up a spirit of greed, lying and deception that had started to creep in. (Acts 5:1-11)

Another use of the keys was during the Samaritan revival the Holy Spirit was only released after Peter's arrival: line (Acts 8:14-17 NKJV) Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, {15 } who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. {16 } For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. {17 } Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

The keys here are in the context of "upon this rock I will build my church" and seem to involve the setting of precedents for the Church as a whole. It was Peter who released the Holy Spirit in Judea at Pentecost, in Samaria during the revival and to the Gentiles with Cornelius's household. Peter then confirmed these precedents at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) freeing

the other apostles and the Church to act in similar fashion. These "precedent-setting keys" also were used to "unlock" the issue of permissible foods...permitting the consumption of all foods. (Acts 10)

Have these keys been passed on? No. They were used by Peter to set spiritual precedents and define many liberating issues in the early Church. The realms have been opened up and now we minister within those areas bound and loosed by Peter, we can see the Holy Spirit coming on the Samaritans and the Gentiles, we can eat unclean foods, we have been released from the burden of the law. (Romans 7:1-6).

But did Peter release us from the Law or did Christ? Christ's work on the cross released us - it did the work in the heavenlies, then Peter with his decisions on earth loosed on earth what had already been loosed in Heaven. Similarly Christ released the Holy Spirit from Heaven but Peter then released it to others. The literal version translates the verse thus: cf1 Matthew 16:19 LITV cf0 And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven. And whatever you bind on earth shall occur, having been bound in Heaven. And whatever you may loose on the earth shall be, having been loosed in Heaven.

Finally, we need to consider our own "binding and loosing" where corporate decisions of the "two or three" have some sort of authority in Heaven. We cannot bind or lose anything we can like, we can only operate within the context of the finished work of Christ. We can release spiritual gifts into someone's life through the laying on of hands such as Paul did with Timothy: line (1 Timothy 4:14 NKJV) Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. (2 Timothy 1:6 NKJV) Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

In Paul's own life he was released from blindness and into Christian service through a similar procedure: (Acts 9:17-18 NKJV) And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." {18 } Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

The laying on of hands seems to loose people from illness and infirmity (Mark 6:5, 8:23, 16:18 Acts 28:8) fill them with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:7,8 19:6 and impart spiritual gifts (1 Timothy 4:14, 2 Timothy 1:6) and ordination for ministry (Acts 6:6, 13:3). All of these bindings and loosings are of the finished work of Christ - His healing ministry, His Holy Spirit, His gifts and His call to ministry. We can also bind sin and forgive (loose) the penitent and set limits on church behavior, which is the major context of Matthew 18 and is seen in operation in Acts 5 and 1 Corinthians 5.

To summarize - all spiritual keys are aspects of the work of Jesus Christ that we are given some power to release or bind here on earth. There is not an apostolic succession but there is a "Christological succession" as Christians release that which Christ has done. Peter had a unique role in setting spiritual precedents for the Church. That role is finished. We now operate within the confines of the apostolic faith. We are to use our keys wisely and judiciously and not as the lawyers did who "took away" the keys in the name of spiritual control and safety.

The Greatest In the Kingdom

The question of who shall be the greatest in the Kingdom gets a lot of play in the gospels and the inverted order of the Kingdom is emphasized. The kingdom virtues of greatness are also a hot topic among those in ministry today! Here are the key verses on this topic (parallel verses omitted):

(Matthew 18:1-5 NKJV) At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" {2 } Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, {3 } and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. {4 } "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. {5 } "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

(Matthew 20:25-28 NKJV) But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. {26 } "Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. {27 } "And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave; {28 } "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

(Matthew 23:11-12 NKJV) "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. {12 } "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

(Mark 9:34-37 NKJV) But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest. {35 } And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." {36 } Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, {37 } "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."

(Luke 22:24-30 NKJV) Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. {25 } And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' {26 } "But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. {27 } "For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves. {28 } "But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. {29 } "And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, {30 } "that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

(John 13:13-17 NKJV) "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. {14 } "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. {15 } "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. {16 } "Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. {17 } "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus does not dispute that He is a King, leading a kingdom. He even says quite explicitly "And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, {30 } "that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

So it is not their place or their ambition that Jesus disputes but the means of getting there. It's not their desire to become great that is the problem - but their mechanism for doing so.

Greatness in the Kingdom does not come by lording it over others (Matthew 20:25,26; Luke 22:25,26) but through child-like humility (Matthew 18:3, 23; 12 Mark 9:36,37) and lowly, sacrificial service of all (Matthew 20:27,28 23:11, Mark 9:35, Luke 22:26-27, John 13:13-17).

Now what does this mean in practice? It can mean small things like a Christian leaders washing his own dishes after a pot-luck supper. It can be as large as having an open-door policy or having non-dominating mission and church structures. Let's look at the practical outworking of these three things one at a time.

Not Lording It Over Others

(2 Corinthians 1:24 NKJV) Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand. (1 Peter 5:2-3 NKJV) Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; {3 } nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;

Thus the bishops of the middle-ages who built castles, and lived in luxury and sold indulgences and lorded it over the flock and dominated their faith with threats of excommunication were acting completely contrary to the will of God. So are tyrannical deacons and elders, pulpit bullies and pompous board members. Christian leaders should be examples of humility, not regarding themselves as "the elite" and not acting in dominating ways. If the apostle Paul refused to be dominating, how much less right do you and I have! Leaders are to build up younger Christians, not stand over them.

This can apply in small things as well as large. Does a leader have time for the "little people" or do they wave them away only speaking to leaders and senior pastors? Do they demand five-star accommodation or humbly accept that which is offered? Do they conspicuously display the latest technology in order to boost their elite status - or do they simply, humbly use technology as a ministry tool?

Child-Like Humility

The greatest Christians often have a clear, transparent, unworldly, child-like simplicity about them. Names that come to mind include Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, Charles Wesley, George Verwer, Brother Lawrence, and John Stott.. These are not sophisticates. They are smart, intelligent people but they are so very, very humble. John Stott regularly visits Manila and goes to my home church where he takes time to talk to ordinary folk and washes his own dishes. John Stott's meekness is evident to all.

What did Jesus mean when He said "unless you be converted and become as little children"? I think He means that our worldly ego has to die, that our "manly pride", our adult sophistication, our competitive ambitious spirit has to be converted into meekness and humility and graciousness. How do you react when slighted or injured? Do you call a lawyer - or do you bear it graciously without threatening? (1 Peter 2:23, 1 Corinthians 6:1-8) Is your honor, status, pride and face central to your existence or your love of God and neighbor? Are you satisfied with being little? As little as a little child? Does being "belittled" make you fly into a rage? If so you need some more converting.

Lowly Sacrificial Service Of All

Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. He could have arrived in splendor, set up a huge palace, and then said "OK you lot, I'm God, I'm in charge, now toe the line, and kiss my signet ring!". But He did not do so. There is no record of Jesus having servants though others certainly did His bidding. He was a great leader but He never belittled people, never put others down and never treated the less fortunate with scorn. Jesus was not brusque with the poor, the prostitutes, the tax-gatherers and the sinners. Rather He took their needs seriously. He did not pander to the rich and powerful but served all sectors of society according to their need for Him. He did not serve as long and as far as it was convenient but gave His life on the cross.

Does this mean that I am not to hold powerful committee positions or that in order to be spiritual I should spend all day washing floors instead of preparing bible-teaching material? Not really, but if I have to wash floors I should not shrink from it. That's what Jesus indicated in His foot-washing example. And if I do hold powerful positions I am to do so as a servant, caring for those in my charge and being an example to them. Christian leadership is a stewardship not an ego-trip.

Finally, leaders cannot "pick and choose" who to serve but must be servants "of all" - of the difficult, the anxious, the slow and inefficient, the poor, the unglamorous, the socially awkward, the young, the old, the educated and the illiterate. We cannot just serve rich businessmen or powerful politicians. And "all" includes all races and ethnicities. Leaders must serve Europeans, Africans, Asians, Australians, Hispanics, Indians, Arabs and so on. Christian leaders cannot model themselves on corporate executives, politicians or generals and other "kings of the Gentiles". Rather we must model ourselves on Christ if we are to be "the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven".

Forgiving Your Brother

Forgiveness is central to the gospel and to life in the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact forgiveness puts an end to the law of retaliation and the concept that "justice means that every wrong is noted and every offender appropriately punished". Such an unflinching and exact world of retributive justice and the "lex talonis" is harsh, grace-less, and unlovely. As someone once said "In a world where it's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon everyone is blind and toothless".

(Matthew 18:21-35 NKJV) Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" {22} Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. {23} "Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. {24} "And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. {25} "But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. {26} "The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' {27} "Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

{28} "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' {29} "So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' {30} "And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. {31} "So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. {32} "Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. {33} 'Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' {34} "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. {35} "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

James gives a one-line summary of the parable above: James 2:13 NKJV) For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment

Jesus has three well known sayings that reinforce this:

(Matthew 5:7 NKJV) Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.

(Matthew 9:13 NKJV) "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

(Matthew 6:14-15 NKJV) "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. {15} "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

In the Kingdom of Heaven mercy and forgiveness are required virtues. Without them we cannot enter for God will not be merciful to us if we in turn are not merciful to others. And who can be saved apart from His mercy?

Christians should be looking about for someone to find fault with or to punish, or to correct. Rather Christians should be looking about to find someone that they show mercy to. The

ungrateful servant in the parable above had a perfect legal right to do what he did. But it was still wrong. Legal rights do not necessarily constitute heavenly approval. To say "You owe me a thousand dollars now pay up or I will take you to court until you pay the last penny" is simply not Christian. (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-8). We owe others and others will owe us. If we don't owe others, we still owe God a debt we can never repay.

Litigious Christians have lost the spirit of the gospel. So have Christians who run to the pastor or to the board with every slight and every infringement by a church member. Christians are not to do the work of the Accuser of the brethren. But in the last days it seems that they will: "(Matthew 24:10 NKJV) "And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another." The last days will be a time of Christian spitefulness, betrayal, litigation and backstabbing. It will be a time when forbearance, mercy and forgiveness have fled the earth.

How does this work out for you and I? We must forget about exact justice, we must forgive old wounds, let go of old debts, release those in our power and be prepared to lose a few thousand dollars in the process. The wicked servant was not prepared to lose a hundred denarii - a hundred days wages (maybe \$10,000 in today's terms) - so he lost everything! Grace always costs something, but ungraciousness costs everything!

[P.S.: For those who may be unfamiliar with it here is 1 Cor 6:1-8: (1 Corinthians 6:1-8 NKJV) Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? {2} Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? {3} Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? {4} If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? {5} I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? {6} But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! {7} Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? {8} No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren!]

Riches and the Kingdom

(Matthew 19:23-26 NKJV) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. {24} "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." {25} When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" {26} But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

(1 Timothy 6:9-10 NKJV) But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. {10} For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

The kingdom is a place of utter simplicity. It is not a place of destitution or poverty - for there is "no more crying or sorrow or pain" and these things follow with great certainty where there is bitter poverty such as that experienced in much of the Two-Thirds World. The kingdom of heaven is glorious, in its final form it even has streets of gold, but even in its glory and wealth it shines with a holy simplicity that is of God.

Those who desire to be rich cannot desire this simplicity, it is foreign to them, and they clutter life up with possessions and acquisitions and schemes. They drown in the sheer complexity of their existence. They cannot live the unburdened and joyful life. The resonant simplicity of the Kingdom, the joy of giving and receiving in loving living, the free as a bird dependence of God is lost on them.

The "rich" in Scripture are those who identify themselves as wealthy and elite and who identify with that social class rather than with the Kingdom. The rich are those whose identity is defined by social status and the amount in their bank account rather than by Scriptural injunctions, who say "I am a billionaire" with greater pride than they say "I am saved."

Rich people become used to admiration, respect and being in charge and for a while this satisfies, but sooner or later many wealthy people feel hollow, because they cannot sort out if they are really and truly loved. Their money has made them friends - but are these true friends? They give to the poor, they endow charities but underneath they are "nagged" but an inner dissatisfaction. Maybe a new project will fix it? Where can they find eternal life?

Jesus told the rich young ruler "sell all you have and give it to the poor, and come follow me". In other words "strip yourself down to just yourself and come and meet God". But rich people cannot do this. They and their money are so intertwined. Their identity is in their possessions, their safety is in having money to spare, and to be vulnerable like other people - is just unthinkable. Instead they want a project to do, a task to accomplish, something they can be in charge of that will bring blessing to millions and win favor with God. So they ask "What must I do to be saved". What's my job Lord? I'm capable, I'm strong, I'm obedient, just ask and I will make it happen for you! But that's avoiding the issue! The issue is "you, all by yourself, unprotected, face to face with the living God". The issue is the ability to be little again and to "be converted and like a little child". And it's very hard to be little while surrounded with the trappings of power. Some rich people will have to take Jesus literally and sell everything, give it to the poor and come follow Him. Some like, the young St. Francis, will give absolutely everything away and

follow Jesus. Some will give up good jobs and tend lepers in Africa, others will give away their investments and find themselves pastoring an urban church. There will be a radical excision of the complexities of life.

Others will have their possessions taken from them by God's "severe mercies" and find Him in the midst of a bankruptcy, divorce or business failure. Others will get cancer and find themselves terrified, small, alone, unable to do anything with all the money in the world and face to face with their Maker at last. Getting the rich to meet God and do business with Him alone is not easy but "all things are possible with God".

Finally, there are those that God gives up on for a time, those whose pursuit of money is like that of Judas Iscariot and Demas and Annanias and Sapphira; those who wander away from the faith and are pierced with many a pang. Those who hang themselves in the dark and who fall headlong and spill out their innards on the ground. Those struck dead by the Spirit of Holiness and carried out by the young men. These are those who come to you in church with the latest "business opportunity" or income protection scheme or investments in ostrich farms and sure fire share purchase. They are the ones who are totally wrapped up in their cars and who are always "going to support" (but rarely do support) a bunch of missionaries.

In the last days we are going to be given a stark choice between "buying and selling" in the grand global marketplace - or following Jesus. On that day the rich are going to face an agonizing choice – their money or their God. (Revelation 13:16-17, 14:9-11 NKJV) He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, {17} and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name... Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, {10} "he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. {11} "And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

It's going to be a tough choice, an impossible choice for many for whom the fear of financial ruin will be more real than the fear of Hell. It will be God or Mammon, gold or salvation, no third choice allowed. We have to sort out the money thing now, well before that day. We need to find our identity in Christ and the radical joyous simplicity of the Kingdom. And whatever we give up to do that is worth it! (see Matthew 19:28,29).

The Parable of the Landowner

(Matthew 20:1-16 NKJV) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. {2} "Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. {3} "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, {4} "and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. {5} "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. {6} "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' {7} "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' {8} "So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' {9} "And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. {10} "But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. {11} "And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, {12} "saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' {13} "But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? {14} 'Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. {15} 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' {16} "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

This parable holds two truths in tension - 1) God is absolutely sovereign and will do what He wants 2) The He is always faithful to His promises. The workers were promised a denarius and they received it. God keeps His word. On the other hand they tried to pin God to their concept of natural justice - that if one hours work earns one denarius then surely twelve hours work deserves more. But God is not one to be told what He should give people, rather He gives according to His will.

This "according to His will" aspect of God is hard for most people to accept. When God is good to my fellow missionary, who may not have worked as hard as I have or made the sacrifices I have made how do I feel? Do I say "hallelujah" or do I go green with envy? What happens inside me when "the missionary next door" gets invited to speak at the big conference or the novice missionary raises someone from the dead and has a revival? Can I cope with a God who gives blessings, when He wants, to whom He wants, and in the amount he wants?

This idea that we can receive blessings from God that we don't in any way deserve, and could never in a million years deserve, is an idea that rocks the spiritual universe to its very foundations. We are used to Law, we are used to the idea of God with a record book, and in our pride we want to believe that our little blessings were very much deserved. We want God to act with some sort of easily understood proportional justice not His unpredictable grace. We want a God who follows our regulations and is not more generous to the person next door. Fortunately for us God is God and gives His gifts according His will which is full of love.

What do I mean "fortunately for us"? Because we have a very lop-sided internal balance sheet. In our own minds we add up all our good deeds and sacrifices and fail to subtract all our sins, failings, unbelief, grumblings and general short-comings. Our balance sheet is not so good or deserving as we imagine (well at least mine isn't). To have a God who is good to us, who is

unpredictably gracious, who suddenly pops up with lavish generosity to undeserving people - is welcome news indeed. The eleventh hour laborers were far less deserving - they just received grace. And it is this grace that caused the reaction that Jesus called "the eye of evil". The envious reaction of comparing rewards – is evil. And in ministry lavish grace often provokes feelings of envy and resentment. How does the of a small church in a community feel when a new church opens in town and suddenly booms and has a revival and he simply keeps on going at the same level. Does the pastor say "the new church is a cult" or invent rumors about sexual immorality or criticize its doctrine or its practices. I have seen all of these envious reactions - and they are evil, and they divide the body of Christ.

This dynamic of unpredictable grace also applies to spiritual gifts which are given simply by grace "according to His will": (1 Corinthians 12:11 NKJV) But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. (Hebrews 2:4 NKJV) God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?

I have known people who prayed every day for ten years for the gift of tongues or healing without ever receiving them. Others pray fervently for a miraculous event or spiritual opening in their tribal group and never see it. Grace and spiritual gifts simply won't be commanded. Yet we are to seek spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1) and to seek openings from God for our ministry and there are spiritual principles that make it more likely that they will be given. You cannot deserve a miracle but you can ask for one! There are even times when you can almost "surf the waves of grace" and everything you ask for just happens.

God is not unjust. You will always get what He has promised you. You will always get your denarius. But the splashes of grace are God's to give - and ours to seek with open, grace-celebrating hearts. I think God is more generous to those who rejoice with others. I don't think He gives much to those with "evil eyes" and who have resentment, envy and grumbling in their hearts. Grace should delight us, no matter to whom it is given. Good on them, praise the Lord - for the chap going to the big conference and the novices miracle and the new church's revival. Praise the Lord for the new Christian with a powerful anointing from God or for the successful evangelist. Praise the Lord for the next door neighbors new car given by his rich uncle. And praise the Lord for the promotion of others. Perhaps this has struck a chord with you, perhaps you have been envious of grace. Why not confess it now and be done with it – and ask the Lord for a new, grace-loving, goodness-celebrating heart that delights in the blessings of others!

The Two Sons

Spiritual pride, lip-service and hypocrisy were frequent subjects in Jesus' parables. The following story about spiritual authority hits all three at once!

(Matthew 21:23-32 NKJV) Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" {24} But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: {25} "The baptism of John; where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' {26} "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." {27} So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. {28} "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' {29} "He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. {30} "Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. {31} "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. {32} "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.

The "chief priests and elders" came to Jesus in the temple - picture beards and pointy hats and long flowing robes and unctuous phrases from pursed lips and beady hateful eyes. They were "in a huff" as they tapped their toes on the stone floor of Solomon's portico and said "Who gave YOU the authority to do these things".

Now if Jesus had answered "God" He would have been dragged away and stoned. So, in a very Hebrew form of argument Jesus invokes His predecessor John the Baptist. (Most of the audience would have known that Jesus was John's successor and the One to whom John had pointed, as this was the subject of some discussion.) If John the Baptist was from God, then Jesus his successor and superior was then certainly from God. It was a very relevant defense.

It also put the authorities in a pickle. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' {26} "But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." {27} So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know."

So Jesus turns the argument on them and their hardness of heart: And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. {28} "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' {29} "He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. {30} "Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. {31} "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The first son is initially disobedient, but eventually goes and does his work. The second says what the father wants to hear, then skips actually doing it. Likewise the tax-collectors and harlots, whose lifestyle was disobedient to God's laws, eventually obeyed Him, repenting when they heard the preaching of John the Baptist while the Pharisees and religious leaders said all the right things, but did none of them, and afterwards failed to repent.

Thus Jesus brings the point back to the vexing question the chief-priests and elders were trying to avoid "Why then did you not believe him?" - that is their own response to clear prophetic spiritual authority. They fall into the trap: They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. {32} "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.

In Jesus' day the religious authorities, while very august, were corrupted and disobedient, concerned with power and prominence and not seeking spiritual truth. The truth was marginalized and confined to prophets in the wilderness, lepers, prostitutes and repentant tax-gatherers. If you obeyed the authorities, you didn't obey John the Baptist or Jesus or God. If you obeyed God, Jesus or John the Baptist - you were thrown out of the synagogue.

Thus there was a breakdown in the system. To be loyal and obedient to the religious system made you disobedient to the heavenly Father. In Jesus day true spiritual authority was outside the walls, in the desert, and not where the ermine robes and chief priests were. Whenever spiritual systems break down this becomes the case. Luther was excommunicated, Wesley had to preach in the fields, the Quaker George Fox wandered England and was fiercely persecuted, and so forth throughout church history. And the system rarely learns. The Jews have never said "Oops, we should have obeyed John the Baptist and Jesus", and the Roman Catholics have never said "After some reflection we think that Luther was correct".

On the other hand just because some systems have been corrupted does not mean that your church or mission is in the same dreadful state as the Jewish religion in the first century. Some churches are delightfully obedient to God. And not all in the wilderness are prophets - some are there because they are eccentric crackpots with crazy (and incorrect) theories. Nevertheless, we should not take all the pronouncements of the system as gospel. We should evaluate them by the Word of God and be sensitive the promptings and leadings of the Spirit in times of revival.

But what does this story told by Jesus mean for us? It means at least five things:

1. That we should respond to genuine revivals and spiritual and prophetic movements and not harden our heart to them.
2. That late obedience by a sinner is better than the lip-serving disobedience of the respectable.
3. That spiritual pride of religious leaders can keep them from repentance and obedience.
4. That some people believe that spiritual appearances are sufficient. These people have an all-too-human God who can be as easily fooled as man. They serve outwardly in the naive belief that lip-service and praise and spiritual flattery will make God overlook disobedience.
5. That true spiritual authority is not vested in (sometimes disobedient) organizational figures such as the chief priests and elders but directly in God and His anointed servants such as John the Baptist and Jesus.

The Parable of the Vineyard

Allegorical interpretation is not popular today but the following parable is plainly an allegory based on the vineyard passage in Isaiah 5:1-7. First the parable in Matthew (see also parallel passages in Mark 12:-12 & Luke 20:9-18)

(Matthew 21:33-46 NKJV) "Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. {34} "Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. {35} "And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. {36} "Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. {37} "Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' {38} "But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' {39} "So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. {40} "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" {41} They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." {42} Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'? {43} "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. {44} "And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." {45} Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. {46} But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.

This is based on a very well-known passage in Isaiah:

(Isaiah 5:1-7 NKJV) Now let me sing to my Well-beloved A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard On a very fruitful hill. {2} He dug it up and cleared out its stones, And planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, And also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes. {3} "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. {4} What more could have been done to My vineyard That I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, Did it bring forth wild grapes? {5} And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. {6} I will lay it waste; It shall not be pruned or dug, But there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds That they rain no rain on it." {7} For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.

So with the straightforward clues provided by Isaiah most of the interpretation is straightforward:

The landowner = God

The vineyard=Israel

The servants = God's servants, especially the prophets

The vinedressers = the Jews, especially the leaders of the Jews who were to care for the vineyard.

The fruit = The things God looks for and wants the nation to bear e.g. righteousness and justice

The nation bearing the fruit of it = The Gentiles

The Son = the Messiah, Jesus

The punishment = the destruction of Israel and especially of its leadership

So, from the distance of two thousand years we can say "the Jews were spiritually barren and rejected Christ and were judged in 70 AD with the destruction of Jerusalem, ta-da, parable fulfilled, now move on". Whoa! Not so fast! What about the Church as God's vineyard? Are their churches that do not bear the fruit of love? Barren church politicians, shrewd manipulators, hardened and tough controllers, frequent nepotism and greedy and grasping clergy are sure sign of a vineyard out of control.

Maybe it speaks to us today? Maybe this vineyard building parable has been going on in Church history all the time! A denomination or movement is formed and starts as a work of God, carefully tended by Him. However, in time it becomes institutionalized and predictable. Its spiritual life fades away and it becomes dry, barren and fruitless. Jesus sends His servants to renew it and they are rejected and cast out. Finally, Jesus sends a precious messenger, who is utterly rejected. After a while comes the judgment - the split, the scandal, the financial crisis, the leadership clash, and the prominent place that movement or denomination once held is taken by another church, more obedient to God. Years later it fulfills the Isaiah passage - broken down, burned, trampled, full of prickly people (the briars and thorns), un-pruned, tangled, messy, dry and un-watered by the Spirit. The sad, tattered end of a once grand spiritual bureaucracy.

So the obvious lesson is - God wants His Church to produce spiritual fruit. He wants to be honored by His Church and to see them obeying Him and respecting His servants and listening to His Son. A second lesson is like it -to get control of the church is not final victory. When they kill the Son, they have not won the inheritance, rather they have lost their lives! Godless church politics, of the sort that abounded in Jesus day, and is still around today, is not clever, nor successful. It's simply accumulating wrath.

Jesus uses an unusual illustration for God's wrath - a rejected cornerstone. The builders are the "nation builders" and "church builders" who have authority to place people "in position". The builders say which stones go "up" and which are cast out, they who determine social position and control the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The cornerstone Messiah is rejected by the social and ecclesiastical hierarchies but not by God, and eventually becomes the chief cornerstone. The cornerstone then seeks justice by stumbling some and crushing to fine dust others. The cornerstone metaphor is used 9 times to refer to Christ. Firstly, in the Psalms: (Psalms 118:22-23 NKJV) The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. {23} This was the Lord's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes. Then Isaiah uses the cornerstone metaphor of Christ in different ways as precious, tried as tested (Isaiah 28:16 NKJV) while Zechariah says the cornerstone shall come from the tribe of Judah (Zechariah 10:4)

In the New Testament it is used three times in the gospels (in the parallel passages of this parable), once in Acts and once in 1 Peter. The Acts interpretation is clear and pointed in the context of the healing of the lame man: (Acts 4:8-12 NKJV) Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: {9} "If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, {10} "let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you

whole. {11} "This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' {12} "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Peter then quotes the same passage in his epistle applying it to the Church:

(1 Peter 2:4-10 NKJV) Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, {5} you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. {6} Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame." {7} Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone," {8} and "A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. {9} But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; {10} who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Going back to the original parable Jesus says: "And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." Peter provides some clue as to what Jesus means when he writes: "They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed." Those who stumble are those who are flagrantly disobedient to the word of Christ and they seem to have been "appointed" in some way to this terrible fate. But who are those upon whom the stone falls? In the context of the parable Israel is the clear first reference and the Stone fell in 70 AD. with the total destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple and the hardened and fanatical Jewish religion. The Stone will fall again in the end times when Christ returns to judge the world and Babylon will fall. But does the Stone fall on people now, in our present time? Could it ever fall on a church? Let's go to Daniel for an answer:

(Daniel 2:34,35; 44-45 NKJV) "You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. {35} "Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth... "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. {45} "Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure."

The Stone here falls on human empires and nations. Wherever human beings set up their own fiefdoms and take control of God's vineyards and become independent of His rule and rebellious, then the Stone will come with a crash and beat that kingdom to fine dust. Churches can become fiefdoms. Churches can be little kingdoms. Churches can even defy God. If they do, then one day, the Stone will fall and they will find themselves non-existent.

What does this say to us who work in the vineyard? That we work for the Owner, not for the system or for ourselves. We are not in control of our churches, missionary societies, movements, schools and kindergartens - God is. It's His and He wants the fruit of

righteousness, justice, impartiality, mercy, and the fruit of the Spirit. We are to be both leading our people and listening to the Owner with reverent and soft and obedient hearts at all times.

Render Unto Caesar

(Matthew 22:15-22 NKJV) Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. {16} And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. {17} "Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" {18} But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? {19} "Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. {20} And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" {21} They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." {22} When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

(John 18:33-38 NKJV) Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" {34} Jesus answered him, "Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?" {35} Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?" {36} Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." {37} Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." {38} Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all.

The relationship between Jesus and Caesar, Church and State, is an interesting one. First some historical background. The Herodians above were followers of the Herods, and their base was in the massive fortress built just outside Bethlehem "the Herodian". Here Cleopatra's husband, the insane Herod the Great ruled, and it was the capital of his various successors. Pilate, on the other hand was a Roman governor, and up until the trial of Christ neither liked Herod or the Jews. It was the perplexities of the trial of Jesus that made Pilate and Herod friends. (Luke 23:12) Now the Herodians and the Pharisees were normally opposites so there coming to question Jesus together indicates their mutual interest in dealing with the upstart "king of the Jews". They try to get Jesus to say that God-fearing Jews "have no King but YHWH" and therefore should not pay taxes to Rome. They all expected Jesus the Messiah to lead a physical revolt, overthrow Rome and of course do away with the taxation. If Jesus boldly made such a statement, then they could go to Pilate and have Him executed as a revolutionary.

So they start by inducing Him to make a rash and fearless statement. To paraphrase it: "Jesus you speak straight, just the truth, just what God would say, Unadorned, unafraid, not couched in vacillations and equivocations. You aren't going to be afraid of Pilate are you? Now out with it, should we pay the Roman taxes." They wanted a straightforward denial that they could trap Him in and have Him killed. But Jesus' answer knocks them flat. He indicates they should pay! Some Messiah! "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? {19} "Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. {20} And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" {21} They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." {22} When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

They were astonished, they marveled. What Messiah would agree to pay Roman taxes. Not the Maccabees. Not the zealots. What sort of a King was this who paid taxes to another king? Jesus clarified this a bit later when, at His trial, He was taken before Pilate. Jesus says: Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." Lets pause and think about this. Jesus was King of the Jews. He preached about a Kingdom and told the disciples they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel in the renewal of all things. But His Kingdom was "not of this world" it didn't charge taxes and it didn't fight wars. His Kingdom was "not from here" (the Praetorium).

Now imagine the capture of a normal earthly King, say the King of Jordan. Say that someone kidnapped the King of Jordan. What would happen? The Jordanian army would be mobilized, its allies would be put on alert, bombers would take off, special forces would be woken up and sent on their mission. The King's servants would fight.

Yet the King of the Jews is captured and in immediate danger of being crucified, is horribly humiliated, and unjustly tried and no-one does anything. In fact when Peter lifts a sword, Jesus heals the ear of the slave that was struck! This is counter-intuitive! But Jesus explains it "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight,". In other words it's not the sort of Kingdom that uses swords and guns, it's "not of this world".

There is a huge tension, right throughout the New Testament, between "the kingdoms of this world" and the "Kingdom of God". The kingdoms of this world which are entirely under the power of the Evil One (1 John 5:18,19) and which Satan offered to Jesus in return for worship, saying that he, the devil, could give them to whomever he pleased. (Luke 4:5-7). Jesus ignored the devil knowing that His Kingdom was "not of this world" yet! But one day would be: (Revelation 11:15 NKJV) Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" In fact Jesus, and those who follow Him shall rule the nations with an absolute despotism (a rod of iron) and shatter them in pieces (Revelation 2:27, 12:5, 19:15). That is all demonically based human authorities, which are based in the resistant principalities and powers, shall be destroyed and replaced with a kingdom where the gospel is preached and Christ is worshiped.

If you have read any of the conspiracy theories or studied Machiavelli's work "The Prince", or glanced at "The Protocols of The Learned Elders of Zion" or even read the various books about the Vatican or Umberto Eco's dry and witty look at conspiracies "Foucault's Pendulum" or anything of Nietzsche you will realize that a dark wisdom exists. A pragmatic and clever statecraft, the politics of realism, the thinking of the Prince of Darkness, based on contempt for the weak and manipulation of the masses. This dark wisdom was the stuff of Herod who murdered his own family. It's the stuff of Stalin who believed that a realistic fear of being murdered was the ultimate weapon for controlling society. And it's the wisdom of Mao - where "all power comes out of the barrel of a gun" and who exterminated 36 million people in the Cultural Revolution. (It is also the wisdom of Saddam Hussein who models himself on Josef Stalin). This dark demonic wisdom is just the machinery, the technology, of envy and self-seeking. James describes it as follows:

(James 3:14-18 NKJV) But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. {15} This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. {16} For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.

{17} But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. {18} Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Jesus' Kingdom is not "of this world" and is not based on military might or on controlling taxation and it has nothing to do with envy and self-seeking. It is a Kingdom of righteous peace-makers. It has not part in the dark, demonic wisdom of real-politics. Jesus did not seek human glory, did not demand taxes from anyone and refused to fight a war even to save Him from the cross. What cause could be better than saving the Messiah from injustice and death? What cause could be better than the rescue of a perfectly innocent man from the hands of the wicked? Surely that justifies the disciples picking up swords? Surely the Father could send twelve legions of angels? Surely a good cause justifies brutal means? But Jesus simply picks up Malchus' ear and heals it. His kingdom was not one you fight for. It is also not one that asks for taxes. If Caesar wants all the gold, then Caesar can have it.

That's what stunned the Herodians, that's why they "marveled". Envy, self-seeking, ruthless ambition, political pragmatism and "fighting for" this and that should not be found in God's Church. We are not "of this world" and our methods and structures are not those of the self-seeking. We are not an alternative human government that wants to charge taxes and take over the machinery of state. We are a spiritual Kingdom of immortal believers. We have time on our side. Lots of time. In fact an eternity of it. There is no need for sweaty scheming, quick grabs, or impatient political moves based on "necessity". All men fight for now, will one day be ours, and much more even. The immortals in Christ shall outlive and outlast the mortals on thrones. When they writhe in brimstone, we shall dance in glory.

Is There Marriage In Heaven?

Jesus really, really outclassed his opponents. Today we will study a great example of it, and learn a bit about life in Heaven.

(Matthew 22:23-33 NKJV) The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, {24} saying: "Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. {25} "Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. {26} "Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. {27} "Last of all the woman died also. {28} "Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her." {29} Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. {30} "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. {31} "But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, {32} 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." {33} And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.

(Luke 20:27-40 NKJV) Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is a resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, {28} saying: "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife, and he dies without children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. {29} "Now there were seven brothers. And the first took a wife, and died without children. {30} "And the second took her as wife, and he died childless. {31} "Then the third took her, and in like manner the seven also; and they left no children, and died. {32} "Last of all the woman died also. {33}

"Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife does she become? For all seven had her as wife." {34} And Jesus answered and said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. {35} "But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; {36} "nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. {37} "But even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' {38} "For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him." {39} Then some of the scribes answered and said, "Teacher, You have spoken well." {40} But after that they dared not question Him anymore.

Jesus' reply is both perfectly logical and utterly astounding. Moses lived four hundred years after Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so when God says "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" then that must mean that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still living 400 years later and were in heaven with God, as resurrected beings, as God is God of the living, not of the dead. The Sadducees only accepted the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) and scoffed at anything supernatural. So Jesus uses their own key passage, perhaps the best-known passage in the Jewish bible, to completely demolish their view of the resurrection!

Jesus adds insult to injury by saying of the Sadducees: "Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." Like many skeptical theologians they had no deep knowledge of the Scriptures and no experience of God's saving power. They were the barren politicians of a dying faith that was soon to pass away.

In Acts we learn a bit more about the Sadducees: "For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection; and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both." (Acts 23:8) So they would not have enjoyed it when Jesus said of the righteous dead: "nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" thus saying that angels existed, a spiritual world existed and that the righteous saints have a very high status "equal to the angels and are sons of God". However, like the angels they lack the ability of physical reproduction. This is essential for any eternal being because if reproduction was allowed and the population of heaven doubled say every fifty years, and no-one died, then after a million years the population would be 2 to the power 20,000 which is trillions of trillions of trillions of immortals. After a few billion years of that... well you get the idea (Does someone out there have a calculator?)

Christians who die in the Lord have three status' mentioned here: equal to the angels, sons of God and sons of the resurrection. In fact Hebrews says that angels are our servants (Hebrews 1:14) and 1 Corinthians 6:2.3 says that we will be their judges: (1 Corinthians 6:2-3 NKJV) Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? {3} Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?

The fact that we are over certain angelic and spiritual beings is clear from the fact that quite ordinary Christians can cast out demons. This was not done even by the prophets in the OT. Something has happened, a fundamental change in the heavenlies occurred with Christ's coming, His ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. The Church now consists of sons of God, glorious beings whose redemption will even set Nature free.

(Romans 8:16-21 NKJV) The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, {17} and if children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. {18} For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. {19} For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. {20} For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; {21} because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Not only is there a resurrection but "those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead," become beings so glorious that it will astonish us and liberate creation. We become immortals for as Jesus said "nor can they die anymore". They are counted worthy of continuous and permanent existence. If you shoot them they do not die, and cannot die. No disease touches them, no pain racks their bodies, they are glorious immortal beings, clothed with powerful resurrection bodies like those of angels. The saints are imperishable, incorruptible, immortal and eternal (see I Cor 15:35-55).

Blockages in the Kingdom

(Matthew 23:13 NKJV) "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

The woes in Matthew 23 are the direct and diametric opposites of the "blessed" in the Sermon On The Mount. The first blessed is "blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God" while the first woe is "woe to those who spiritually deprive others of the Kingdom of God". The second blessed is about mourning and comfort, while the second woe is about devouring widow's houses. And so on in parallel, instead of the pure in heart we have woe to those who clean the dish instead. Instead of blessed are the merciful we find woe to those who tithe dill and mint and cummin but have forgotten mercy. The last beatitude is about those who are persecuted and the last woe is about those who engage in persecution and build the tombs of the prophets.

The people these woes are directed against are the blockages to true spirituality. Those who substitute outwardness for inwardness, and who prefer the performance of small duties to the exercise of love and mercy and the apprehension of deeper truths. These are those who starve the sheep, who leave dead churches in their wake and forbid any movement of God that smacks of spiritual reality.

These are those who have to be in control, and who delight in denying things to people. The poet Goethe once described the Devil as "him who always denies". These deny people the Kingdom, they shut people out from God and angrily scowl at those who have found true joy in Christ. They are terrified of true spiritual power being unleashed in the pews of their church.

There is something shocking about true intimacy with God that makes "control freaks" afraid. In reaction to the Holy Spirit they run, and they also forbid others from going anywhere near that "dangerous thing" - a deep personal, emotional, real relationship with God.

"Control freaks" as they are popularly known, are afraid of meeting a God who can control them. An unpredictable God, a God who can love lepers and be embraced by prostitutes. A God big enough to go beyond all social conventions.

Such people are blockages in the Kingdom. They often rise to power in ecclesiastical structures and create structures that are elaborate defenses against spiritual change - including revival and renewal. They leave whole denominations in spiritual desolation so that God has to work around them, and raises up new leaders and alternative movements. The control freaks clog the channels of grace for a little while until they are either removed or flowed around.

But "woe to them". They are undone! They are judged. They will be charged with the blood of all the prophets and the righteous martyrs (Matt 23:35). They are not just unblessed, they are desolated, and so destined for perdition that it is their natural realm. In fact they are called "sons of Hell" (Matt 23:15) just as much as true Christians are called sons of God (Matthew 5:9). These people are very religious but utterly doomed.

This puts a tremendous responsibility on those of us in positions of spiritual authority to be people who are not blockages, but channels of grace, vessels of mercy. people who have the

savor of life about them. We are to be servant leaders not dominators of the flock. Hence the exhortations earlier in the chapter about titles and prominence and being called "Rabbi". If we are humble about our use of power we will not end up like the scribes and Pharisees!

Early in my ministry I remember meeting certain denominational officials who wore gray flannel suits and strutted in their prominence and power over pastors under appointment. They were the evangelical equivalent of the Politburo. They seemed to want us to cringe before them and to fear the "black mark" they could give us that would ruin our careers forever. I went overseas as a missionary and in time the denomination changed and the old guard moved on. But they were terrifying men and they knew it. Such powerfulness is not from the Holy Spirit.

How then can we avoid falling into the love of control? First trust God with His Church. It's His to order and ours to serve. Secondly, be open and humble in any use of power. Thirdly, remember our job is not to "prevent trouble" but to preach good news. And finally, simple empathy and love for those in our charge. We must be reluctant to bruise and eager to bless. Able to restore people gently with an eye to our own weakness.

Parable of the Ten Virgins

(Matthew 25:1-13 NKJV) "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. {2} "Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. {3} "Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, {4} "but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. {5} "But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. {6} "And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' {7} "Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. {8} "And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' {9} "But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' {10} "And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. {11} "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' {12} "But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' {13} "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

This is one of the most controversial of the parables with a multitude of interpretations. It is a "crisis parable" where there is a decisive moment which people are prepared for or totally unprepared for. "On that Day" "in that hour.." is when the reality of our faith and wisdom is tested and found out. The parable of the ten virgins is a call to alertness, wisdom and spiritual preparation. Above all it tells us that we cannot sit on our lees in comfort and complacency. There is a time of reckoning and it may come suddenly, and catch us unprepared.

Folly is not a frequent theme in modern teaching and it is seen as almost harmless, almost like an eccentricity of sorts. Yet folly, slackness, and lack of wisdom are seen as truly catastrophic in their consequences in Scripture. (by "folly" I mean the biblical definition - poor judgment and a lack of practical wisdom). The foolish person is one who refuses to absorb the wisdom God so generously provides - and wisdom is one of the chief qualities that the Holy Spirit imparts (Isaiah 11:1,2 Acts 6:10). So by refusing wisdom the person is, in many ways, refusing God.

Good judgment and practical wisdom in living are often not thought of as spiritual qualities yet they are required to live a righteous and peaceful life. A clattering fool cannot fulfill all righteousness and a person full of their own opinions (as the fools in Proverbs are) are incapable of walking for any length of time in the ways of peace. Folly is a sure sign of spiritual inadequacy. Which is why the foolish virgins are soon spiritually depleted running out of the "oil" of the Holy Spirit. The wise, however, are spiritually receptive, they seek more, and are far better prepared spiritually for the day of crisis.

This is eloquently expressed in the speech of Wisdom in Proverbs chapter 1:

(Proverbs 1:20-33 NKJV) Wisdom calls aloud outside; She raises her voice in the open squares. {21} She cries out in the chief concourses, At the openings of the gates in the city She speaks her words: {22} "How long, you simple ones, will you love simplicity? For scorers delight in their scorning, And fools hate knowledge. {23} Turn at my rebuke; Surely I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you. {24} Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded, {25} Because you disdained all my counsel, And would have none of my rebuke, {26} I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your terror comes, {27} When your terror comes like a storm, And your destruction comes like a whirlwind, When distress and anguish come upon you. {28} "Then they will call on me, but I will

not answer; They will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. {29} Because they hated knowledge And did not choose the fear of the LORD, {30} They would have none of my counsel And despised my every rebuke. {31} Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way, And be filled to the full with their own fancies. {32} For the turning away of the simple will slay them, And the complacency of fools will destroy them; {33} But whoever listens to me will dwell safely, And will be secure, without fear of evil."

To repent and turn at Wisdom's rebuke is to have her spirit poured out on you. (Prov 1:23 above). However, to refuse wisdom is to refuse God and to invite calamity and destruction upon one's life. (Proverbs 1:24-32 above). Folly is such an offense to the Holy Spirit that when fools in a time of crisis call out and seek wisdom at last God does not answer because "they have rejected knowledge and the fear of the Lord". (v29) They only want wisdom for their own self-preservation, not because it is true and good.

Physical fitness may also give us analogy. Take two soldiers, one of whom does not exercise and the other of whom keeps very fit indeed. What will happen in the day of battle? When the fitness is needed the unprepared soldier cannot go out and purchase endurance! it must be part of his life well before the crisis comes. So we must be prepared for days of spiritual trial and testing.

Why does Jesus lock the foolish virgins out? You cannot study after the exam has been held - it does not get you any marks, and you cannot go and get wisdom after the trial for which it is required. In the extreme case in Luke 16 the rich man wakes up to the nature of his life when he was in torment and asks Lazarus to go back and testify to his brothers. Did this realization change his situation? Not at all! It was wisdom but far too late. To be wise after judgment has come is of no use at all.

Christians are required to be "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3, Ephesians 1:17) and Paul prays that they will be given the spirit of wisdom and revelation and the apostle John makes the point that the Holy Spirit is our instructor in "all things" (1John 2:20,27). Wisdom is not optional. Wisdom is a sign of the Spirit's presence in a human mind and heart. The wisdom of Joseph and Daniel even caused kings to declare that a "spirit of the gods is in them". We must not live complacent, self-indulgent Christian lives but rather be disciplined, wise and watchful, full of the Spirit and inwardly prepared for every crisis that life brings.

The time preceding Christ's return will be "night". A time of darkness and instability. A time when the foolish will stumble and be destroyed and the wise will just be able to make it through. Strong temptations and false miracles will abound (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12) and Christians will need every ounce of discernment to escape. (Matthew 24:24) Those who have sought comfort rather than wisdom and spiritual growth will be unprepared. The door of opportunity for wisdom will shut and they will be left outside. Therefore while we have the light we should heed it, and strive to lay hold of the wisdom and truth of God in our lives so we may live in peace and enjoy God.

The Parable of the Talents

(Matthew 25:14-30 NKJV) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. {15} "And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. {16} "Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. {17} "And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. {18} "But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. {19} "After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. {20} "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' {21} "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' {22} "He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' {23} "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' {24} "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. {25} 'And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' {26} "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. {27} 'So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. {28} 'Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. {29} 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. {30} 'And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Here is another crisis parable about a time of reckoning when the foolish and unprofitable are punished. The "one talent" servant is not particularly bad by conventional morality. He does not appear to be a murderer, adulterer or criminal. He is just lazy, foolish, incompetent and unprofitable. He is a "time-server", a person who whiles the hours and days of his life, who does "little here and a little there", who lacks any industry or ambition and whose work ethic is "as little effort as possible for as long as possible". This servant ends up in outer darkness for having a lousy work ethic.

Industry, ambition and a good work ethic are sure signs that a person cares about their life and wants it to count. God has made us to be contributors, to give more than we take, to make a difference according to the level of our ability. He has not made us to play safe, cruise along forever and accomplish little or nothing. The Holy Spirit that give wisdom also gives strength, industry and capability. The Holy Spirit is creative, life-giving and productive and those qualities will find expression in the life of the diligent and godly believer.

Here are two Proverbs that show God's opinion of slackness:

(Proverbs 10:4 NKJV) He who has a slack hand becomes poor, But the hand of the diligent makes rich.

(Proverbs 18:9 NKJV) He who is slothful in his work Is a brother to him who is a great destroyer.

The second Proverb needs a little explanation. How is a slack person a "brother to him who is a great destroyer". Think of a slack person who wires a house incorrectly so a fire breaks out and people are burned to death or another who leaves a farm gate open so that all the animals escape and are lost or another who is careless in washing their hands before an operation so patients get septicemia or in the recent war in Iraq the "friendly fire" that comes from a "mistake". Slackness causes death and destruction every day, all around us. People with a lousy work ethic cause problems in banks, hospitals, armies, farms - and even churches. If you have ever tried to correct a bank error or a social security mistake you will know how much pain human slackness can inflict. God wants responsibility, drive, diligence and proper accomplishment in His servants - not destructive slackness.

God rewards diligence according to the result we achieve with the means and ability that we have. Both the five talent and two talent servants were pleasing to God and each was given responsibility according to his ability" (verse 14) and reward according to their "return on investment" (verses 20-24). What then is God's "investment" in your life and your clear responsibility before Him? Has he given you children? Are you therefore a diligent parent giving godly instruction? Has He given you a ministry? Are you carrying it out faithfully according to His Word?

Your "spirit" will show in your work. If you have a wise and diligent spirit and a "spirit of excellence" as Bezalel had (Exodus 30:1-3)- you will produce excellent work. If you have slothful and craven spirit your work will be inferior. To not produce "after a long while" (verse 19) is to have failed in who you are. A few pastors sit in their study and dream their life away, doing "just enough" to stay employed but without practical vision and implementation and without much spiritual fruit. Some churches like such pastors because they seldom rock the boat. There are missionaries in remote areas who drift along day by day, stuck in a slow and easy rhythm and without accountability to man. There are evangelists who give the same six sermons from town to town and pay more attention to the offering than the fruit of conversion. These servants use up the time and resources and opportunities in the Kingdom of God and squander them. Their neighborhoods slide into sin and they do not travail in prayer. Their very idleness ensures victory for the forces of darkness. Now they are in the minority! (After all this parable has the slack as one-third and the diligent as two-thirds).

We must discharge our ministry with due diligence, industry and thought. We must put our mind, heart and energy into what we do for God. This is no time to be slack, there is much to do and the Lord deserves our very best.