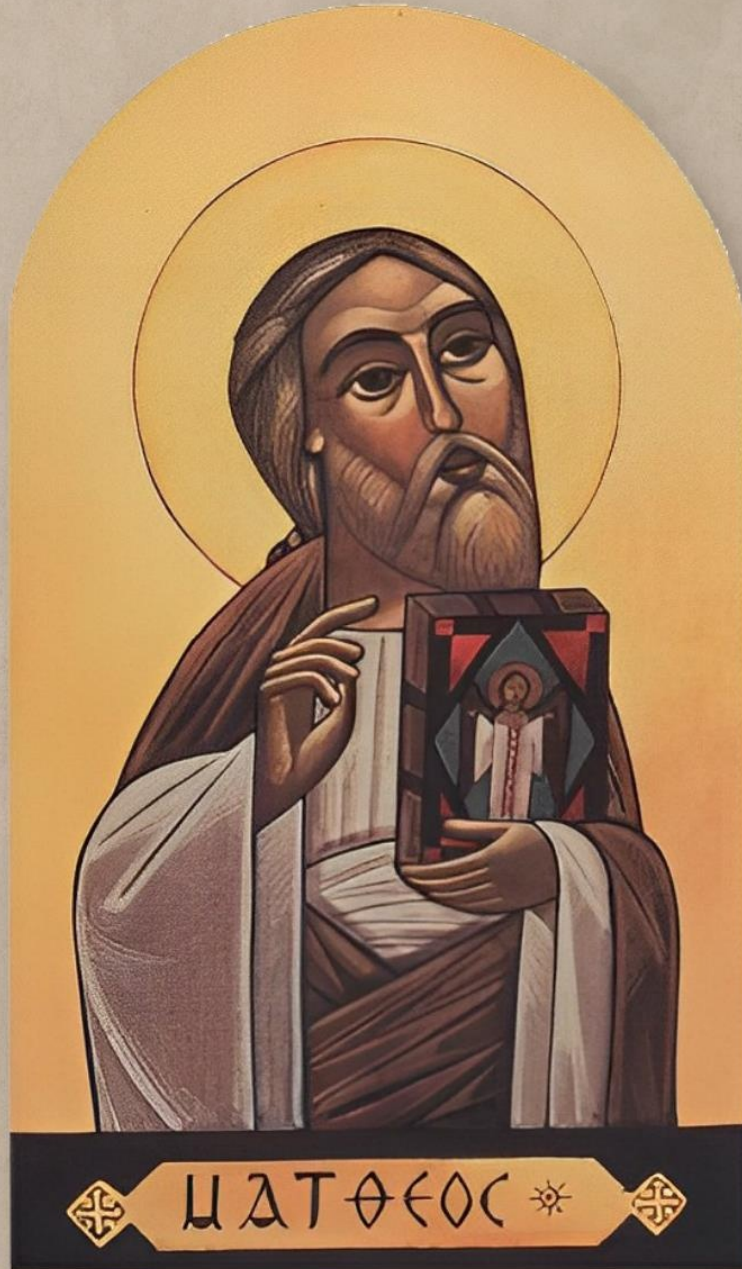




**St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church**  
Heliopolis, Egypt



**Commentary on  
the Gospel of St. Matthew**

*An Exegetical Study*  
*of the Gospel according to*  
*St. Matthew*

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**His Holiness Pope Tawadros II  
118th Pope of Alexandria  
and  
Patriarch of the See of St. Mark**

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# Chapter 1

## (1-17) the genealogy of Jesus

### (1) “The genealogy”

This refers to the table of lineage; it is taken from the lineage tables that the Jews maintained in anticipation of the awaited Messiah. Those tables were lost at the time of Jerusalem's destruction in 70 A.D by the Roman leader Titus. God predestined their care of these tables so that they would provide proof that Jesus is the Son of David, so they would believe in Him. There are 2 tables of Jesus' ancestry in the holy Bible - one of them (Luke 3: 23 – 28) is oriented towards the Gentiles, so it includes the legalistic lineage ....meaning the men whom the law considers fathers. The wife of a man dying childless may be married to that man's brother, and the children are considered the dead man's offspring. (Deuteronomy 25 : 5 & 6). Thus, some of the sons mentioned are adopted sons, to make it clear for the Gentiles that those were adopted sons and entitled to salvation like the Jews. However, in (Matthew 1: 2 – 17), the evangelist is addressing the Jews; thus here recorded the names of the biological fathers, because the Jews are God's people, descendants of their natural fathers, namely, the Jews. So we see that Joseph - who was St Mary's betrothed - had a lawful father who was Heli, who was mentioned in Luke, and who died childless. But Jacob, mentioned by Matthew, was his real father, as attested by St Severus of Antioch. As for St John, he recorded the Divine lineage of Jesus (John 1: 1 & 2).

“Jesus Christ” : Jesus is the human name of Christ and means "Savior. “Christ" means "God's anointed for this service," namely, salvation of mankind. In the Old Testament, prophets, priests and kings were anointed. Christ embodies all three. God empowers the anointed to discharge his task. **“The Son of David the Son of Abraham”**: son of King David as was mentioned in prophecies (Isaiah 9:7)...and Son of Abraham as God promised him (Genesis 22:18). All the Jews knew that the awaited Messiah would be of the seed of David and Abraham.

### (2 – 17)

1. Noticeable in this series, is the lineage's progression from Abraham down to Jesus, since Christ bears mankind's sins, saves us, and redeems us.....because this series includes several sinners like Rahab the adulteress, Tamar who wore adulteress' clothing, and Uriah's wife with whom David committed adultery. At the same time we see that the sequence recorded by St Luke is from Jesus upward to Adam, raising all humanity towards God the father of Adam, because Luke was addressing the Gentiles.

2. In his genealogy, Matthew speaks of Jesus' natural fathers, who were born through natural reproduction. Luke, however, mentions the legal fathers.
3. The genealogy concludes with Joseph, rather than the holy virgin, although Joseph was not Christ's physical father. Since the Jews acknowledged lineage solely through the father, Joseph was considered Christ's father, not only to protect Christ within the Jewish community, but also as directed by the angel (20 – 21). At the same time, the holy virgin was also of David's lineage; thus, when they wanted her to leave the temple as she turned 12, they brought men from David's seed, and God chose Joseph to be her betrothed. There is another opinion, namely, Luke mentioned Christ's ancestry from His mother's side, St. Mary; he thus mentions Heli, Mary's father - also called Joachim – so that Joseph could be ascribed to him. Attributing a man to his father-in-law was an acknowledged Jewish custom. Anyway, both tables of Jesus' lineage written by Luke and Matthew were accredited by the Jews as we see that none of them objected to those tables.
4. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite were among Jesus' grandmothers; this is how Christ proclaimed that salvation is for all humanity - Jews and Gentiles.
5. Matthew mentions that the genealogy is divided into 3 sets, 14 generations each. It would seem that the Jews tended to use certain numbers for blessings - like number 7; number 14 is a multiple of 7. It also seems that this progression was recorded and known to the Jews, despite omissions; examples are king Jehoram (sometimes abbreviated to Joram) who begat Ahaziah (not Uriah), who begat Joash, who begat Amaziah, who begat Uzziah. So Matthew omitted those names to achieve his goal, namely, Jesus came from the seed of David and Abraham. The first set started and ended by Abraham and David the great, respectively. The second proceeds from those who were taken captive because of people's sins; this ascends to the third, reaching Jesus the Savior of the whole world.
6. The difference between Matthew's and Luke's accounts confirms that neither had seen the other's account; rather, each was written genuinely by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to tell us more details about Jesus Christ.

***+ Jesus was unashamed to mention His evil and Gentile ancestry. Similarly, it is incumbent on us to honor our fathers and relatives despite their possible social lowliness, and we also have to appreciate their efforts and virtues, while remembering that our ultimate ancestry is from Jesus and the Church where we were born by baptism. We should thus be confident that we are distinct from those around us, because of this great grace while, at the same time, not despising anyone due to their***

*lowly ancestry since, in God's eyes, they could be better than we are and destined for a better place in heaven. Let us respect and honor all people and learn from their virtues.*

### **(25 – 18) Joseph’s first dream and the birth of Jesus**

#### **(18) “Betrothed “**

"Betrothed" means "attached to a man." This means that, at Christ's birth, she would-be attached to a man, namely, Joseph. Thus, the Jewish community would not consider her an adulteress. To the Jews, "betrothal" was tantamount to "marriage," and the betrothed woman is called the "betrothed's woman." Physical relations follow the betrothal period. This is analogous to Muslims' practice: the first step is betrothal and the second is physical relations.

After the betrothal, Joseph received Mary from the temple, took her to his home, and kept her as a chaste betrothed. He did not have any marital relations with her. He was therefore quite surprised to note that she was pregnant prior to their marriage. He was perturbed: torn between her innocence on the one hand, and her pregnancy on the other, which he could see clearly. Matthew’s saying “**before they came together,**” meaning during the betrothal period, does not mean that they subsequently had marital relations. The holy virgin's virginity remained perpetual.

#### **(19)**

Joseph could deliver Mary to the priests to be stoned, or set her free secretly avoiding any scandals. But, being a righteous man, he wanted to put her away privately and let her go without punishment because he did not want to be associated with the crime of covering-up sin.

+ *The more you love God the more you show love towards others - do not judge them, even if you felt they were wrong, because “..... Love covers all sins. “(Proverbs 10:12) you must also be merciful towards others.*

#### **(20 – 21)“Joseph son of David”**

The angel is reminding him that he is of the seed of David, from whom Christ would come. Furthermore, being a righteous man, Joseph understood readily all God’s proclamations. An angel appeared to him in a dream and told him the truth about the virgin’s conception, namely, that which was conceived in her was of the Holy Spirit, not through any human.

And he encouraged him to take her, meaning to keep her in his house, and take care of her and her Newborn. He also told him the name of the newborn, namely, Jesus, meaning "Savior," for He saves believers from their sins. “**He shall save his people from their sins.** “He is a Savior, but not in the sense of saving from the Roman occupation, as the Jews thought, but a spiritual Savior raising them up from their sins to live righteously.

+ *If you were undecided between two difficult issues then, by praying, God is capable of leading you to the best path, as the angel guided Joseph.*

**(22 – 23)**

Matthew reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah 7 : 14 - so this is Matthew speaking not the angel - telling us about the virgin Mary's pregnancy and explaining the meaning of **"Immanuel"**. "That is the concept of incarnation which means that God becomes a human like us to redeem us, to be with us and to indwell us.

+ *By declaring His name as Immanuel, meaning God is with us, God is proclaiming that through His love He wants to get closer to us, and to be with us, to save us from all our sins and afflictions.*

**(24)**

Joseph's righteousness appears clearly in his obedience to God, by rejecting his first idea of putting Mary out of his home. He even assumed full responsibility for her and believed God's words despite their defying mental perception.

**(25)**

Joseph took care of St Mary until the baby had been born. He called Him "Jesus" as the angel had directed him. He also continued to take care of her all his life. When Matthew says **"And did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn son,"** this does not mean that he knew her subsequently, rather, it means they had no marital relations - he just cared for her as a father the expression **"not.... till"** is seen in several places in the holy Bible, conveying the same meaning. Hence, the psalm says "so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy." (Psalm 123:2)

It does not mean that after the Lord has shown His mercy we stop raising our eyes towards Him. And also when Noah sent the raven from the ark, the holy Bible says: "and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth." (Genesis 8:7) Here the word "until" does not mean that when the water dried up, the raven returned to the ark - it was on earth and did not come back. Calling Jesus **"first born Son"** does not mean that Mary had other sons subsequently, since that expression is used for the first son even if he were the only son. It is thus logical to deduce that it was impossible for Joseph, whom God had chosen for this holy mission, to defile the womb that the Holy Spirit had sanctified.

## Chapter 2

### Arrival of the Magi: (1 – 6)

#### (1 – 2)

The Magi (wise men) were the astrologers who studied medicine and astronomy. They were scientists in their countries and also were considered priests.

Their gifts indicate their great prominence. They came from the east most probably from Persia or Iraq. Their number was not mentioned but we see that at least there were three leaders, who could have been accompanied by a large number. They learned from their ancestors 'prophecies that a star would appear, heralding the birth of a great King.

Balaam son of Boer the prophet, who also hailed from the east where the Magi resided, said: "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, And batter the brow of Moab, And destroy all the sons of tumult."

(Numbers 24:17)

They could have also understood this from Daniel - who was the Magi chief –through his prophecy about Christ's birth: "Know therefore and understand, That from the going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem Until Messiah the Prince, There shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; The street shall be built again, and the wall, Even in troublesome times."(Daniel9:25)

The star they saw was not an ordinary one; it was either an angel appearing as a star, or a special spiritual star sent by God, for the following reasons:

- 1- Stars move from west to east but this star moved from east to west.
- 2- This star did not only appear at night but also during the day while sun was shining.
- 3- It appeared sometimes and disappeared at other times (as what happened when they asked King Herod.)
- 4- The star was moving high in the sky then it descended over a lowly house where Christ resided. When they followed the star from the east to Jerusalem, they were sure that the prophecies were right, and that He was indeed the King of the Jews. They thought He would be born in the royal palace -therefore they enquired there.

#### 3

Herod was the one called "Herod the Great." He was an Edomite by origin, hence, an intruder among the Jews. He had usurped the kingdom and was known for his violence, to the extent of killing his wife and some of his children. At that time he was 70 years old, and he feared the new King, Many people in the palace and all Jerusalem were disturbed and confused when they heard about the new King and they wondered about potential conflicts between Herod and the new King. This Herod was Herod Antipas' father, who murdered St John the Baptist, and the grandfather of Herod who murdered St James the son of Zebedee, and imprisoned St Peter.

#### 4

Herod understood that they were talking about the awaited Messiah and he feared losing the kingship. He thus assembled all the chief priests – present and past – as well as all the scribes and teachers of the law, to inform him about Christ's whereabouts, so that he could kill Him.

*+ Regardless of the mighty or power a person may have, no one can maintain their peace while being steeped in sin, away from God, since only God's children can enjoy real peace.*

#### 5-6

"Bethlehem": is a small village about eight kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. It is also called Ephrathah (Micah 5:2) or the City of David, since it was David's birthplace (Luke 2:4). "Bethlehem" that we are talking about is in Judea, and it is distinct from another Bethlehem in Galilee. We can see from the prophecy that it was a small and lowly village but it became great through Christ's birth in it. It should be noticed that neither the priests nor their leaders cared about searching for the awaited Messiah of Whom the prophets spoke, and to whom all the symbols referred. That was because of their preoccupation with their positions and acquisitions. However, the Gentiles and those unrelated to Christ – represented by the Magi – did search for him, travelling from distant lands. The Holy Bible thus emphasizes that Jesus came for the salvation of the whole world, attracting each person by the most suitable way for him (the Jews through prophecies and the Magi by the star, since they were astrologers). The important thing is for us to be responsive to God's voice.

*+ However weak and lowly you may be, you will become the greatest person through Christ's indwelling your heart.*

#### **The Magi worship Jesus: (7-12)**

Having known the location of Christ's birth, Herod asked the Magi about the exact time the star had appeared in their country; he then calculated the time of their travel from Persia to Judea and found it would take more than one year. He did so in order to know the new King's age. "Secretly: "because he knew his evil intent to kill Christ, and to cover his plan of killing Bethlehem's children, which would surprise the Jews.

#### 8

Herod hid his cruelty, and his desire to kill the new King, in his heart. He feigned innocence to the Magi, as someone who wanted to worship the new king just like it seems that he was so perturbed, that he forgot to send someone to follow them to find out the place of the Newborn.

#### 9-10

Relying on their logic, the Magi enquired at the royal palace, thinking that was where the new King would be. But no one guided them. When they left, they found that the star had

disappeared. Having failed to locate the Newborn's place, the Divine star reappeared so they rejoiced. The star then guided them to Bethlehem and to the house where Jesus was born.

*+ Adhere to God's commandments to guide you throughout your life. Also follow the guidance of your confessor, more so than your own thoughts and logic - so that you do not stray away from Christ. Do not allow the world and its problems to become a barrier between you and your goal, namely, the love of God. The more you adhere to God's commandments, the more He will continue to guide you. However, neglecting Him will lead to your confusion, asking "How can I hear the voice of God??"*

## **11**

Upon seeing the Infant Jesus, with his mother the holy virgin and Joseph the carpenter, they felt great reverence, and worshiped him with joyful hearts. Then they presented their gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh - all referring to Christ's mission. Gold because He is King, frankincense - incense - because He is a priest sacrificing Himself on the Cross, and finally myrrh which refers to the suffering and death he would face. Those gifts could have been helpful in covering some of the holy family's expenses during their journey to Egypt.

Here, we see the Magi's great faith despite their having witnessed Christ's slowly condition, and the Jews' failure to glorify their King; they maintained their faith according to God's guidance through the star.

## **12**

The Magi did not understand Herod's evil intent; but following their visit to Jesus, God told them in a dream not to go back to Herod because of his wickedness. God guided them to another way back to their homeland. And it sounds that they saw this dream directly after they saw Jesus so that they would depart quickly before Herod pays attention and execute his plan of killing Bethlehem children.

*+ Having enjoyed the company of Jesus, do not return to the evil Herod - hence, your former sins. Rather, return to your home which is paradise, where Adam was created. Put differently, raise your heart to heaven, maintaining a spiritual relationship with God.*

## **Joseph's second dream :(3 – 15)**

### **13**

The Magi told the holy family what God had told them in the dream, so they understood that Herod was searching for Jesus to harm Him. However they were not disturbed, and awaited God's guidance. Then God's care for them appears as well as His disdain for the evil Herod. The Lord's angel thus appeared to Joseph for the second time in a dream, and asked him to take the Boy Jesus and His mother Mary, and escape with them to Egypt. They would remain in Egypt until told what to do next. Egypt was the nearest place to Judea and was not ruled by Herod.

*+That is how God proclaims to us fundamental aspects to be observed in our spiritual conduct:*

*1- The necessity of tolerating pain for our justification. It must have been very hard indeed for an old man, a young maiden, and the Infant Jesus, to endure a laborious journey and reside in a foreign land.*

*2- Assurance of the incarnation of Christ, and his endurance of all human suffering since His childhood, without invoking His Divine powers to relieve himself.*

*3- Fleeing, rather than resisting, evil.*

*4- Blessing of Egypt so that it would be a center for spiritual work, throughout the generations, by its scientists, monks and saints.*

#### **14**

Joseph obeyed the angel; he did not say "I am too old to travel," or "The Boy is too young to do so," or "I am not familiar with Egypt;" rather, he arose at night and headed towards Egypt. "During the night:" it is most likely the same night he saw the dream to hurry up and escape before the execution of Herod's plan. Being a stranger, he had few belongings to pack; also, being from out of town, no one paid much attention to him.

#### **15**

The holy family moved to Egypt, passing through and blessing many places. They stayed there about two years until Herod's death. That is how Hosea's prophecy about the Messiah's return to Israel was fulfilled: "And out of Egypt I called my son. (Hosea 11:1) This prophecy was about the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, and also about Christ's return from Egypt to the Jewish homeland.

#### **Killing Bethlehem boys (16 – 18)**

#### **16**

Herod was furious upon discovering the Magi's disobedience, considering it a great affront. His fear of the new King increased. His heart's cruelty drove him to murder all Bethlehem's male children, thus including the new King. Furthermore, to ensure His death he ordered his soldiers to surround the place so that no one in Bethlehem and its surroundings would survive. According to Herod's estimate, the new King would have been about one year old - more or less. So he ordered that all boys, two years old or under, be executed to ensure elimination of the King, and to avoid possible soldiers' mistakes in estimating the boys' ages.

The order was executed in Bethlehem and its vicinity, and it included boys older than the new King - just to make sure. This demonstrates Herod's savagery.

## **17-18**

That is how Jeremiah's prophecy, which was referred to in verse 8, was fulfilled. It expresses what happened during the captivity and the massacre of Bethlehem. The news had spread all over Jerusalem and the surrounding regions, since Ramah is located north of Jerusalem. So they heard the wails and cries of the Jewish mothers (symbolized by Rachel) because of losing their children. Rachel, Jacob's wife, buried in Bethlehem, lamented initially those who perished during the Babylonian captivity, and also mourned the children murdered during Herod's tenure. All this refers to the sadness which prevailed not only in Bethlehem, but also in all the regions surrounding Jerusalem.

*+ A cruel heart renders a person insensitive to those around him –so he may hurt them in the process focusing on achieving his own goals. May you always be empathetic towards others, to feel what they feel and to refrain from achieving your goals at others' expense? Rather, seek others' comfort ahead of yours, as Christ did by dying for our redemption and salvation's sake.*

## **The return to Nazareth (19 – 23)**

### **19 – 20**

After the holy family's approximate two -year sojourn in Egypt, awaiting God's permission to return to Israel , the angel appeared to Joseph for the third time, and informed him of the death of Hero and his son who had sought to kill Jesus..(Because Herod had killed his son five days before his death after he had reigned for 37 years - that was around 4B.C.) Then the angel ordered Joseph to return.

### **21**

Joseph obeyed and did not ask to stay in Egypt saying that he was too old, or that he wanted to stay away from the wicked in Judea. The virtue of obedience transcends all logic - thus God leads the lives of those who obey Him.

### **22**

Upon reaching the outskirts of Israel, Joseph heard that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod. Since he was known for cruelty, like his father, Joseph was afraid to return to Bethlehem next to Jerusalem where he thought it would be suitable for Jesus to live next to the Temple and the Jews' priest's. Then he asked God what he should do. "Having been warned in a dream"- maybe by an angel like what had happened previously – to go to Galilee in the north of Israel because it was ruled by Herod Antipas, Archeus' brother. He was known for his kindness, and there were problems between the two brothers.

### **23**

Upon arrival in Galilee, he went to Nazareth where he had resided initially -that was his home town. It was thus fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that He would be called a Nazarene. The word "Nazareth" means branch; Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zachariah had prophesied that Jesus would be called "the branch"(Isaiah 11: 1-2), (Jeremiah 33:15)

and (Zachariah 3:8) this is the fifth time that St Matthew quoted the prophecies. Jesus lived in Nazareth about 28 years until he turned 30. He worked with Joseph in carpentry. Not much was mentioned about this period, other than His obedience to His mother and Joseph. Jesus increased in grace and stature, and He visited Jerusalem during feasts to worship according to the law.

*+ God leads your life, so do not be perturbed by the wicked, regardless of their threats. Herod and his son Antipater died and God kept away Christ from Archeleus when he lived in Galilee. The wicked are powerless before God. Therefore, lead a serene and tranquil life, focused on God, and He will protect you from all evil.*

## Chapter 3

### The Baptist's annunciation and Christ's baptism at his hands

*(I) John the Baptist's personality (v. 1 - 6)*

*"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.' "And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and the entire region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins." (Matthew 3:1 - 6)*

**V1:**

*"In those days:"*

Put differently, that was when Christ was about thirty years old. More specifically, John the Baptist was exactly six months older than Christ and his ministry started six months before Christ's.

*"John the Baptist:"*

He was John, the son of Zachariah the priest; he was popular for baptizing the Jews. That is why he was called *"the Baptist*. "He led an ascetic life for about thirty years in the wilderness thus being, in the Old Testament, a model of monastic life, plus love of prayer and solitude. That was a spiritual period, preparing him for the greatest ministry, namely, paving the way for Christ's mission and redemption.

*"Preaching:"*

He started preaching after thirty years of complete silence. He called the people to repentance and returning to God.

*"The wilderness of Judea:"*

It is located east of Jerusalem, near the Dead Sea.

**V.2:**

He preached repentance, hence, purging the heart from sin, and changing direction from evil to a godly life.

*"At hand:"*

That was because six months later Christ, Whose Divine reign is over all hearts, would start His ministry. His warning was clear, namely, that the kingdom of heaven was approaching, meaning Christ's reign over hearts, which is a spiritual, divine reign, not earthly as the Jews had imagined, for delivering them from the Romans' brutality. He

preached God's kingdom in hearts, to qualify mankind for celestial life, ruling with God forever. It is impossible, though, for God to rule a heart adhering to sin and refusing repentance.

### **V.3:**

In this verse, St. Matthew the evangelist, addressing the Jews, quotes the prophet Isaiah who was popular and well known to them, to confirm paving the way for the expected Messiah (Isaiah 40:3).

Matthew stated that John was *“the voice,”* thus distinguishing him from Christ *“the Word Himself.”* His preaching was powerful, as one crying and calling to pave the way for God in hearts through repentance which, in turn, leads to good conduct.

*“Prepare the way of the Lord: “The aim of such preparation is removal of all obstacles; this is analogous to a herald calling for the preparation of the passageway before a king or a great man. The intent here is purging the heart from all sins and pride.*

*“Make His paths straight:”* This is achieved by shunning hypocrisy and evil, hence, straightening all crookedness, leading to an upright heart, facilitating God's passing through, and indwelling, it.

### **V.4:**

This verse describes John the Baptist's ascetic life. His attire was rough camel's hair, not soft garments. He was girded with a leather belt around his waist that was neither ornamented nor expensive. His food was locusts – a known insect; some believe it is a wild plant. He also ate the honey which bees produced in rock fissures. This means he was satisfied with the very basic food and clothing needs, being preoccupied solely with celestials and serving God. He was a model of monastic life in the Old Testament - like the prophet Elijah.

### **V.5:**

Due to the depth and spirituality of John's preaching, and its significant effect on people's hearts, most Jerusalem's inhabitants, as well as those of all the region of Judea and the towns around the Jordan River, came to him. The intent of the word *“all”* is *“most.”*

### **V.6:**

Having been affected by his sermons, each and every one of them came forward to be baptized in the Jordan confessing their sins. That was the baptism of repentance, clearly symbolizing the sacrament of penance, administered at the hands of the New Testament priest. Baptism was well known to the Jews, since they used to baptize new converts. The supplement here is confession and repentance. The New Testament baptism, though,

differs from John's, since it is through the Holy Spirit Who changes the human nature, purifying it from all sins. Clearly, the baptism of repentance is a prelude to the New Testament's baptism. This is what happens today, when an adult confesses his sins, prior to receiving the sacrament of baptism.

+ *Repentance is the way to prepare your heart for being indwelt by Christ. Do not ignore God's loud calling to you to repent. His calling is not only through the holy Bible and the church's teachings, but also through the people surrounding, and reproaching, you. Hasten to repent before God, daily, then before the priest, to obtain forgiveness of your sins.*

## **(II) Paving the way (v. 7 - 12)**

***"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? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 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. 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. 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. 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."*** (Matthew 3:7 - 12)

### **V.7:**

#### ***The Pharisees:***

They are an ancient Jewish sect which came into being during the second century B.C. They observed strict adherence to the letter of Mosaic Law. They were considered the Jewish intellectual leaders. Their name means "separated" or "detached" or, put differently, "God's chosen." They were confident of their own righteousness - always saying, "If two people entered heaven, then at least one of them must be a Pharisee."

#### ***The Sadducees:***

They were the sect opposing the Pharisees' authority. They believed neither in eternal life nor in spirits. They shared the Pharisees in the Jews' spiritual leadership. They were considered the wealthy aristocratic class, descendants of Zadok the priest. They did not come to John for repentance - rather, to acquaint themselves with John, who had attracted many of their own followers. Likely, they were seeking a leadership position behind that new leader, whom all the Jews were following. John the Baptist was strong. He confronted them with their crooked hearts, since they appeared to seek repentance when, in fact, they were far from it. Thus, he scolded them describing them as ***"brood of vipers"***

- vipers being a particularly cruel species of snakes; he therefore ascribed to them selfishness and brutality.

**"The wrath to come:"** This is God's Judgment Day, when they would most certainly have to stand before God. He was amazed at their having neglected repentance in preparation for eternity, despite their being teachers of the Jews, by telling them **"Who warned you....?"**

**V.8:**

John called upon them to prove their repentance, by doing deeds of repentance, hence, giving up sin and doing good deeds. Simply talking about repentance without bearing fruit is useless. Similarly, their baptism would be in vain.

**V.9:**

He also rebuked them for their arrogance. Being descendants of Abraham who was given promises, they believed that they, too, would be recipients of promises. However, God seeks those who walk in Abraham's righteousness, to become His true children.

**"These stones:"**

He pointed at the stones in front of him. As God had created Adam from dust, he was equally able to create children from stones for Abraham. He also meant that God is able to raise up children from stones for Abraham, in reference to the Gentiles' hardened, cruel, hearts, that worshipped stone idols; if they believed and changed to a godly life, they would become true sons of Abraham.

*+ Do not rely on the fact that you are Christian. Rather, repent and do good, in order to enjoy God's care and the kingdom of heaven. The name will condemn you, failing to live through it. Similarly, your family's great esteem and your closeness to spiritual people are useless - rather, they call you to model yourself after them, lead a life of repentance, and do good deeds like your Christ.*

**V.10:**

**"The ax:"**

This is the wooden Cross, or God's word that condemns all non-believers - it uproots and destroys them, because of their failure to believe on Christ the Savior.

**"The ax is laid:"**

This refers to the approaching Judgment Day. Repentance and its proof - the fruits of righteousness - are necessary prerequisites. Failure to produce the fruit will lead to inevitable eternal fire.

**V.11:**

John differentiates between the baptism of repentance and the baptism of Christ, God the Word, that is through the Holy Spirit, for renewal of the human nature. Despite his leading the baptism of repentance, he is unworthy, compared to Christ, to be the lowliest of His servants – that servant being the one who carries his master's sandals.

This demonstrates the Baptist's humility. Although he was the most powerful of all prophets, he denied himself, giving all the glory to Jesus.

**"The Holy Spirit and fire:"** This refers to the Holy Spirit's baptism that renews the nature, plus the fire which burns evil and the nature that tends towards sin, to renew man, in order to live with God.

**V.12:**

John concludes by proclaiming Christ the Judge. He likens Him unto the farmer who separates the wheat from the chaff after threshing, using the winnowing fan. This process involves using a tool, consisting of a long stick with wooden "fingers" at one end to lift the grains that are mixed with the chaff: the grains fall readily, while the chaff is blown away. The grain would thus be collected separately from chaff. This process takes place in a spacious area near the farm, called the threshing floor. The grains would be collected in large sacks for storage in the barn, and the useless chaff burned.

<b>"Winnowing fan:"</b>	It is the word of God, or the Cross, through which
God will judge both non-believers and unrepentants.	
<b>"Threshing floor:"</b> <b>"The barn:"</b> <b>"Fire:"</b> <b>"The chaff:"</b> <b>"Wheat:"</b>	This is the end of the world - Judgment Day. This is the kingdom of heaven, or the Church. This is eternal torment. This refers to evildoers. Those are the believers who will be glorified with

Christ in heaven; John refers to them as **"His wheat,"** meaning those who were close to Him, and who would remain with Him in heaven. Conversely, he does not refer to the chaff, the evildoers, as "His chaff," because they had separated themselves from Him.

**(III) Christ's baptism (v. 13 - 17)**

*"Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13 - 17)*

**V.13:**

Jesus spent his childhood and youth, up till the age of thirty, in Nazareth and the region of Galilee. Subsequently, He moved south to Judea, by the Jordan River, where the multitudes had gathered around John the Baptist. Christ presented Himself on behalf of humanity, to receive the baptism of repentance - although he was sinless, He bore our sins, and offered repentance on our behalf.

<b>"Then:"</b> was preaching.	This refers to the six-month period during which John
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**"Jesus came:"** He manifested Himself publicly among the multitudes to share us, and fulfill all righteousness on our behalf, although He was in no need of repentance.

**"The Jordan:"** The river that extends about 200 miles from Israel's north to south.

**Vs.14 & 15:**

Through the Spirit, John knew that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah. He was astonished at Christ's humility, since He told him humbly that he needed to get baptized by him. How could he baptize Jesus? Jesus replied gently and even in greater humility, asking John to permit Him to be baptized, to fulfill all righteousness on behalf of all the sinful humanity, which had failed to fulfill that righteousness, due to straying away from repentance and uprightness.

+ *Meditate on such amazing love, so that you, too, may humble yourself, not only before those greater than you are, but also before those inferior in stature or age. Ask yourself: "Do I speak gently and humbly with all people?"*

**Vs.16 & 17:**

Jesus went down to the River Jordan, immersed Himself in the water, then came up from the water. This is why our Church insists on full immersion in the water during baptism, because this signifies burial and resurrection with Christ, as mentioned in the Bible:

*"...buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him..."*

(Colossians2:12)

For the first time God manifests His three Persons very clearly: Christ the Son in the water, the Holy Spirit Who appeared in the form of a dove over His head, and the Father, Whose voice was heard from heaven. That was obvious for John who was baptizing Christ, and for all who were present. This is why the Church celebrates Christ's baptism, calling it the *"Feast of Immersion,"* because He was immersed in the Jordan's waters. The day is also called the *"Feast of Theophany (Divine manifestation),"* because God manifested His three Persons on that day, hence, the fundamental attributes of the Godhead - the three Persons being one God. This Divine manifestation, and the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove on His head, mark the beginning of Christ's ministry on earth; this is analogous to the practice of olden times, when kings, prophets and priests were anointed with oil - symbolizing anointing by the Holy Spirit - prior to starting their ministry. This is the current practice, in the New Testament, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, or Priesthood.

<i>"My beloved Son:"</i>	He is the Son of God in essence and attributes,
Since eternity; He changed our sonship to God through adoption.	
<i>"In Whom I am well pleased:"</i>	This is because He fulfilled God's will

Through incarnation, followed by redemption for mankind's salvation.

+ *Christ fulfills all righteousness on our behalf to teach us love for each other, to complement each other's shortcomings, and to cover each other's sins, so we learn humility while serving others secretly.*

## Chapter 4

### The temptation on the mount - calling the disciples

*(I) The temptation on the mount (vs. 1 - 11)*

*"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' But He answered and said, 'It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'*

*"Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.' "Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.' "Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.' "Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him." (Matthew4:1 - 11)*

**V. 1:**

*"Then...."*

This means "following His baptism in the Jordan, He came forward to face temptations and vanquish them, in order to enable us to triumph." He did not come of His own volition to face temptations, to teach us not to cast ourselves into temptation, as Lot had done when he went to Sodom. Rather, when God permits our temptation, we struggle to triumph with His help. The Holy Spirit indwelling Christ led Him to the wilderness by the River Jordan, where He confronted Satan. In those days, it was believed that demons resided in the wilderness and desert, but not in holy places frequented by righteous people. Christ went to the wilderness in order to vanquish Satan, and to impart to us the strength and confidence to triumph over Satan whenever confronted by him.

Our Lord Christ permitted Satan to tempt Him, to emphasize the inevitability of temptations, to make us feel that He is close to us, and to make us feel that He senses our temptations, as the holy Bible says: *"For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted."* (Hebrews 2:18) This gives us confidence that we will not only triumph, but also acquire, through those temptations, spiritual blessings.

+ *But God will only permit Satan to tempt us to the extent profitable to us; and He will give the Divine help we need to triumph.*

## V. 2:

Christ spent forty days fasting and praying in the tranquility of solitude. He did so in order to proclaim the importance of solitude with God - even if that were accompanied by hunger, because our life's aim is enjoyment of, and satiation with, God. This, in turn, agitates Satan, who resides in souls indifferent to God. However, he is defeated when attempting to fight a soul satiated with God. Similarly to Moses and Elijah, Christ fasted continuously for forty days, so as not to exceed human endurance, which would lead people to believe that He was not a normal human being. Thus, "*Afterward He was hungry,*" to emphasize His humanity.

The number "forty" is "ten multiplied by four." The number "ten," in turn, refers to "perfection," hence, the Ten Commandments. Finally, the number "four" refers to the earth's four cardinal points. Thus, "forty" represents the perfect struggle in all directions. That is what Christ accomplished for our sake - although His was in no need of fasting, He fasted as a human being to sanctify our fasts.

## V. 3:

Having heard heaven's testimony that Christ is the Son of God, as He was in the Jordan, Satan was amazed to see that Christ hungered, and he doubted His Sonship to God. He was thus encouraged to tempt Him as a human being, asking Him to prove His Sonship to God, by changing the stones to bread to satisfy His hunger. He did not mention any delectable foods - simply bread, attempting to convince Him of the necessity of eating to sustain the body. The intent behind this temptation is to induce Christ to commit the sin of disregarding God, rather than trusting His care and His provision of all His needs. Christ did not resort to His Divinity to appease His soul; rather, He used His Divinity to feed the multitudes (Chapters 14:13 - 21 and 15:32 - 39), to teach us to labor for others' comfort, and to rely on Him for our needs, trusting His care, and fulfilling our tasks in all honesty.

***"If You are the Son of God..."***

This is a perplexing question, intending to shake one's self-confidence. Such is Satan's customary approach in his wars with us. It is a provocative question, propelling us to do what he wants, thus falling into sin.

+ We should thus not hasten to do whatever occurs to us - since those could be thoughts planted by Satan. We should, a priori, submit any thought to the test of prayer - especially when important decisions are at stake. We should spend sufficient time in prayer and, likely, fasting, in anticipation of God's guidance and exposure of Satan's wiles.

#### **V. 4:**

Christ's response to Satan was a verse from the holy Bible (Deuteronomy 8:3) proclaiming that, essentially, spiritual repletion is through the word of God - as opposed to focusing on material satiation. Thus, rather than answering Satan's question about Sonship to God, Christ proclaimed that a spiritual person would be more preoccupied with the word of God than material needs, relying on the holy Bible's guidance which blocks Satan's wiles.

That was the first temptation. It could have been preceded by others; but Satan was prominent in those three temptations, hence, he confronted Christ. The holy Bible tells us (Mark 1:13) that Christ was tempted throughout, the forty-day period, not just at the end thereof.

#### **Vs. 5 & 6:**

*" Then the devil took Him..."*

The devil did not force Christ, rather, he took Christ with His consent. This is because, in order to teach us how to vanquish Satan, Christ agreed, of His own will, to be tempted.

*"The holy city:"*

This is Jerusalem, the site of God's temple - the holiest place. Thus, Satan wages his wars everywhere - even in the holy places.

*"The pinnacle of the temple..."*

This is a very elevated place - about two hundred meters above the ground.

#### **The second temptation:**

Satan took Christ to throw Himself off the highest point of the temple, hence, its pinnacle, so that angels might bear Him, and land Him in the temple's courtyard borne on their hands, thereby fascinating the multitudes, thus proving to them that He was indeed the Son of God - then start His ministry on this basis.

Satan quoted one verse, intending to trick Christ into believing that He would thus be fulfilling the word of God - since the Divine promise is that God would protect His children with His angels (Psalm 91:11 & 12.) Clearly, Satan was still confused. Is Christ the Son of God, or an ordinary human being??

*"It is written:"*

In his attack, Satan resorted to the use of God's words, to convince Christ and cause Him to fall into temptation - as he does with us. He uses biblical verses out of context, interpreting them to satisfy his evil ways. The error a person commits, in this regard, is casting himself into temptation. Whereas God cares for us, and saves us from temptations which befall us, it is improper to cast ourselves into temptation then ask God to save us.

#### **V. 7:**

Christ responded saying that although God cares for His children, it is not befitting for man to doubt this care, and to cast himself into temptation, just to verify that God cares. However, when we do fall into temptation, God will protect us (Deuteronomy 6:16.) In this way, Christ fled vainglory, to teach us humility in toil and service – even secretly to the extent possible.

#### **V. 8:**

##### **The third temptation:**

It represents allurements of the world's glories and pleasures, and the easy path to meet our needs, rather than suffering and bearing the cross. Satan thus took Christ to a high mountain, symbolizing pride, and offered Him the desire to possess all the world's kingdoms, with all their pleasures and lewdness.

*"All the kingdoms of the world:"*

Those were the towns and villages of Judea. They represent the world's cities with all their glories.

#### **V. 9:**

The lying Satan feigned ownership of all the world's kingdoms. Most likely, his intent was his authority over the evil lusts with which he was attempting to entice Christ. The condition to acquire them was submission to Satan - hence, worshipping him. The temptation here is the love to possess and to have authority. In this case, Satan was offering Christ an alternative solution: to rule the entire world instead of His pending toil and Passion. In this case, Christ would liberate the Jews from the Roman occupation, the prerequisite being submission to, and worshipping, Satan.

#### **V. 10:**

*"Away with you:"*

Christ proclaims clearly His rejection of Satan's words and thoughts.

*"Satan!"*

Meaning, "the adversary."

*"Him only you shall serve:"*

Worship is to God, and God alone. Consequently, this prohibits not only idolatry, but also the adherence to, and preoccupation with, worldly lusts. Love of the world had no place in the heart of Jesus Christ - the second Adam. Consequently, not only was He unaffected by Satan's lures, but also, as a human, He adhered fully to the love of, and submission to, God. Hence, He responded to Satan quoting a biblical verse (Deuteronomy 6:13) that worship is to God only.

+ *The world's lusts will be rejected by a heart which fears God and submits to Him.*

## **V. 11:**

Having been defeated by Christ, Satan left Him - but temporarily. Satan's attempts would resume, as was the case when the Pharisees and Sadducees tried to ensnare Christ, in which instance angels came to Him to raise His crowns of triumph to heaven. Angels will consistently strengthen and guide us, raising our prayers and triumphs to heaven -pending our eventual crowning in eternity.

Christ confronted temptation solitarily; triumph would thus be attributed solely to Him, not to angels' help.

**"Then the devil left Him:"** This means that each temptation has an end. In this way God gives us a chance to regain our serenity, and to grow in His love, before facing the second round of temptations. This, in turn, imparts to us the necessary strength to confront subsequent temptations.

## **(II) Christ's return to Galilee (vs. 12 - 17)**

***"Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.""*** (Matthew 4:12 - 17)

## **V. 12:**

Christ resided in Judea for several months. Events of that period are mentioned in the first few verses of St. John the Evangelist's gospel. During that period, John the Baptist finalized his mission while witnessing for Christ. In the meantime, many of John's disciples followed Christ, as He remained in Judea in order to clarify the consistency between His message and John the Baptist's. Herod arrested and jailed John, after the latter had fulfilled his evangelical mission.

### ***"Galilee:"***

This is the northern part of Israel, extending from the Jordan eastwards, to Acra westwards, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

## **V. 13:**

Christ returned to Galilee where he had lived the first thirty years of His life. However, He did not return to Nazareth, rather, He went to Capernaum, which was a well-known Galilean town, located by the Sea of Galilee – also known as the Sea of Tiberias - in the areas belonging to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali.

**V. 14:**

Isaiah prophesied (Isaiah 9:1 & 2) Christ's evangelizing in Galilee. This constitutes the sixth prophecy concerning Christ which St. Matthew mentioned.

**V. 15:**

***"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali:"***

Those belonged to two of Israel's tribes (sons of Jacob) - they lie west of the Jordan, and north of the Sea of Galilee.

***"By the way of the sea:"***

This refers to the Sea of Galilee.

***"Beyond the Jordan:"***

This means "the land lying west of the Jordan."

***"Galilee of the Gentiles:"***

The Jews melded with the Gentiles in the Galilean region - hence the label "Galilee of the Gentiles." Idolatry and Jewish worship also melded. That is why Judeans despised inhabitants of that region - for their involvement in the Gentiles' worship rites. The region of Galilee encompassed the twenty cities which Solomon had given Hiram, as a gift, for helping him build the temple (1 Kings 9:11)

**V. 16:**

***"Who sat in darkness:"***

This earth's inhabitants accepted sin and lived in it; this is symbolized by "darkness."

***"Have seen a great light:"***

The light refers to purity and the new life with God. The intent here is Christ's evangelism, and His calling them to repentance and the return to God.

***"The region and shadow of death:"***

(Psalm 107:10) The transgressions in which inhabitants of that region had immersed themselves lead to the death sentence. The word "shadow" means all wickedness leading to, and associated with, death.

**V. 17:**

***"From that time:"***

This means that Christ started evangelizing in Galilee after John's arrest. Christ evangelized precisely what John the Baptist preached, namely, repentance without delay due to the fast-approaching kingdom of heaven - which is God's spiritual reign over hearts. This reign was fulfilled through Christ's resurrection, and will be completed in heaven.

+ *Although you may be steeped in sin and accompanied by evil-doers, God seeks you, is ready to purify your heart, renew your life, and indwell you*

- *He will even transmute you into sainthood. Be receptive towards God, by accepting His call to repentance, and returning to Him. He will help and support you, and help you*

*prosper in all your steps.*

**(III) Calling the disciples (vs. 18 - 22)**

***"And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." They immediately left their nets and followed Him. Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him."*** (Matthew 4:18 - 22)

**V. 18:**

***"The Sea of Galilee:"***

This is a freshwater lake, measuring about 19 kilometers, by 16 kilometers, by 50 meters in length, breadth and depth respectively. It was also known as the Lake of Tiberias or the Lake of Gennesaret. As Christ walked on the beach, He saw Simon (later named Peter or Cephas "the rock") and his brother Andrew - both the sons of Jonah. Being fishermen, they were casting their net into the sea.

**Vs. 19 & 20:**

Christ called them to follow Him, become His disciples, and busy themselves with a better occupation, namely, to become fishers of souls to know God - they obeyed. It is quite unusual to favor the love of God over one's necessary tasks.

Obedience is surrendering human will and logic in favor of the love of God. Christ chose His disciples from among the illiterate, from the region of Galilee which the Jews despised, in order to work through them for the glorification of God - and not for any human endeavor. God's working through us is conditional upon our obedience.

***"They immediately...:"***

This signifies immediate obedience. It would seem that their previous familiarity with Christ, mentioned in John 1:40 - 42, motivated their following Him. However, this demonstrates the extent of their being influenced by, and their positive responsiveness to, the word of God.

***"Left their nets....:"***

This means giving preference to following Christ over their occupations and private lives. Their love was so great, that they abandoned even the nets and their livelihood.

## **Vs. 21 & 22:**

### ***"Zebedee:"***

He was the husband of Salome who followed Christ eventually (Chapter 27:56.) Likely, he was wealthy, had employees helping him and was a prominent member of society (John 18:15.) A short while later, as Christ walked on the beach, He found two other brothers, namely, James and John the sons of Zebedee; they were fishing companions of Simon and Andrew. Their cooperation is evident in large catches of fish, following which Christ called them (Luke 5:6 - 11) - they left the nets that they had been mending with their father, and followed Christ.

+ *Following God is better than necessary tasks and the relationship with parents. This does not mean neglecting our work or dishonoring our parents. Rather, it means that obedience to God supersedes everything else. Be prepared to surrender part of your comfort and pleasure in favor of adherence to your spiritual life. You will then enjoy fellowship with God and internal peace.*

## **(IV) Evangelizing and labor (vs. 23 - 25)**

***"And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them. Great multitudes followed Him--from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan."*** (Matthew 4:23 - 25)

## **V. 23:**

Christ journeyed about nine times out of Capernaum, in the Galilean region, during which He visited about two hundred towns and villages, home to almost fifteen thousand inhabitants in each. This means that Galilee was home to about three million people, to whom Christ preached repentance and the kingdom's approach.

### ***"Their synagogues:"***

Those were places of worship that sprung up during the days of captivity. They abounded in all towns, and the Jews continued to worship there, reading the holy books and delivering spiritual sermons - this was because the temple was uniquely in Jerusalem. Christ used those synagogues to preach the salvation that He offered to humanity. Christ was tender, and He healed their afflictions to proclaim His love for mankind. Those miracles led to the attachment of hearts to Him; in turn, He spoke to them in deeply profound spiritual words.

### ***"All kinds of disease:"***

This means all the physical ailments which afflicted the people.

**Vs. 24 & 25:**

Christ's fame spread far and wide because of His miracles and compelling teaching, not only in Galilee, but also in other regions, namely:

1. **Syria:** a Roman province east of Galilee.
2. **Decapolis:** towns characterized by Roman privileges, east of the Jordan, presently called "Golan."
3. **Jerusalem:** a well-known city, in the southern part of Judea, the site of God's temple.
4. **Judea:** a region covering the southern part of the Jewish homeland - it includes Jerusalem plus many other towns and villages.
5. **Beyond the Jordan:** a region south of Decapolis.

***"Those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics:"***

Those ailments were mentioned since they were the most serious. The "***demon-possessed and epileptics***" may have been imbalanced due to a neurological disorder; they would sometimes lose consciousness and fall to the ground. The "***paralytics***" were paralyzed in parts or most of their bodies.

+ *May you accustom yourself to do good deeds everywhere, by aiding the ailing, the needy, and the weak, whether you were asked for help or not. Once affected by your love, they will readily accept your words about Christ, repentance, and the return to God.*

## Chapter 5

### The sermon on the mount - the beatitudes - fulfillment of the law

*(I) Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount (vs. 1 & 2)*

*"And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying...."*

(Matthew 5:1 & 2)

#### **V. 1:**

The multitudes thronged behind Christ. He thus took them to the mountain to speak to them His life-giving words. Spiritually, the mountain refers to transcending materialism, to power, and to spiritual steadfastness. He delivered to them a lengthy speech, covered in three chapters. Considered Christianity's charter, it spans most of its important tenets. Out of their love for Him, His disciples gathered closely around Him.

*"He went up:"*

Several multitudes followed Christ. Those were the multitudes mentioned in the previous chapter. In order for them to see and hear Him clearly, He went up a short distance on the mountainside and sat down - then His disciples drew closer to Him. The multitude sat in front of Him in the expansive valley. That was one of Galilee's mountains in close proximity to Capernaum.

#### **V. 2:**

In this sermon, among Christ's most famous, He started speaking and teaching the multitude, plainly and directly. Despite the recurrence, on other occasions, of some of its implications, this sermon is so important, that it is considered to constitute Christianity's constitution. Christ's sermon was tantamount to interpretation of the law, supplemented by the means for perfecting a Christian lifestyle. Christ came to fulfill, not to negate, the law.

(v. 17)

*(II) The beatitudes - or the "blessings" (vs. 3 - 12)*

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great*

*is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*  
(Matthew 5:3 - 12)

### V. 3:

Christ started His discourse by encouraging and praising His children; He thus revealed their reward, to motivate them to do good spiritual deeds throughout their struggle in their spiritual life. His first words of praise were aimed at "*the poor in spirit*" - meaning the humble. This is because each and every virtue is anchored in humility. On the other hand, pride is the first sin which led to Adam's, and Satan's, falls. God indwells a humble person's heart, through His spiritual kingdom, thus guaranteeing him, not only the eternal kingdom of heaven, but also lasting joy.

### V. 4:

Christ subsequently praises those who lament their sins - meaning the penitents. He also praises those who mourn others' sins and pray for them; God grants them peace in their hearts in this life, plus heavenly solace and glories in eternity.

Consequently, God's children cherish tears and remorse over sin, in order to lead a righteous lifestyle, having warm hearts, consistently thankful to God, while being sensitized to His tenderness and forgiveness. Such grief is quite different from grieving over material losses, or grieving for failure to acquire material gains; we should liberate ourselves from such vain grief.

### V. 5:

Enveloping ourselves in repentance leads to serenity, internal meekness, and indifference to material losses or gains. The body's tranquility and energy temperance are directly proportional to the spirit's relationship with God. Our Lord Christ gave Himself as the ultimate example of meekness, so that we may learn from Him.

Some believe that here, during our earthly life, the meek lose their rights. However, God promises the meek to "*inherit the earth.*" "*The earth*" does not only mean the new earth in the kingdom of heaven, but also the earth on which we live - since a meek person is loved by everyone, and God's material and spiritual blessings abound for him - he would not need anything material. Furthermore, "*the earth*" symbolizes the flesh, which submits to the spirit, and becomes a temple for the Holy Spirit. Finally, "*the earth*" symbolizes the evildoers, who reverse their path of wickedness by frequenting the meek, who, in turn, win them over to Christ.

**V. 6:*****"Righteousness:"***

This embodies uprightness, good deeds, and a godly lifestyle. Christ is the perfection of righteousness. To hunger and thirst for Christ is to feel the constant need to have our fill of Him. God satisfied the Israelites' hunger and thirst in the wilderness by providing them with the heavenly manna and water from the rock, thus granting them life in the barren wilderness; analogously, Christ is our life, without whom we cannot live. Whoever seeks Christ will most certainly be filled and satiated with joy. Such hunger and thirst nurture our ambition to be closer to God, thus fostering our growth in our spiritual life. This ambition embodies seizing each opportunity to know Him through prayer, reading and meditation and, above all, the joy of partaking of the holy sacraments.

**V. 7:*****"Mercy:"***

This means being sensitized or empathetic towards others, and positioning ourselves in their place. In turn, this implies not only satisfying their material or emotional needs, but also sharing their movements and thoughts, following Christ's example: He was incarnate, and shared our nature – sin excepted. We must also bear in mind that being merciful to others means being merciful towards Christ, since He called the needy *"His brethren;"* hence, whatever we do towards them is tantamount to doing it for Him. Mercy's reward is obtaining God's mercies in our life, especially during hardships and, eventually, in eternity (See Chapters 10:42 and 25:34 - 46.)

**V. 8:*****"The heart:"***

This represents man's innermost feelings, thoughts and intentions. The heart's purity implies stripping it of all evil desires and all worldly preoccupations tending to draw it away from loving God. Such purity qualifies the heart for God's indwelling, and for being able to see God, and feel His constant presence and support in everything. This is not through physical sight or hearing, rather, through spiritual sensitization - because it is more profound than human senses, and significantly gratifying for the soul. All these attributes satisfy, collectively, the soul's necessary purity, qualifying it to see God.

**V. 9:*****"Peace:"***

This is the heart's tranquility, comfort and joy. Peace is instilled within the soul, leading to a peaceful life. This involves surrendering all sources of anxiety ranging from evil desires to worldly ambitions. This includes even surrendering all rights - while retaining the most important right, namely, inner peace. Having acquired our peace, we can make peace with others, by loving them, praying for them, helping them overcome their hardships and even tolerating them, given their loss of peace.

Peace is submission to God, the God of heaven, who grants it to those who love Him. Through His blood on the Cross, God has reconciled heaven and earth and established peace between them. By seeking peace we would truly be children of God.

### **Vs. 10 - 12:**

The eighth and last beatitude is the product of all the first seven put together- namely, it is enduring persecutions for the sake of a pure and honest lifestyle, and for the sake of obeying Christ's precepts and ordinances. As a reward for enduring limited suffering in this life, our Lord promises us the unlimited glories of the kingdom of heaven.

**"Righteousness:"** This is uprightness, good deeds and a godly lifestyle. Being mistreated for errors committed, rather than for being righteous, is a natural reward.

**"They revile....you....:"** This means mocking you, mocking your Christ, and mocking all your beliefs and exemplary conduct.

**"All kinds of evil:"** Those are evildoers' false allegations against you, as they did during the Roman persecutions, and as they do in successive generations.

**"Rejoice and be exceedingly glad:"**.....Because you have shared Christ's Passion, and because of the heavenly glories awaiting you, compensating you for what you had endured.....

**"Great:"** This is to accentuate the unutterable magnitude of the heavenly glories. Christ calls on us to maintain confidence in our righteous conduct, regardless of all the evildoers' doubts and allegations that we endure, cognizant of the fact that this is the way leading to receipt of our heavenly reward – especially since all the saints and prophets had endured for God's sake – because endurance is a fundamental prerequisite for receiving the kingdom. These beatitudes specify the attributes of a Christian. Each one of them is indispensable for acquiring the eight rewards. Our ultimate example is Christ. He provides us with the practical application for all those attributes - which He possessed.

+ *If your quest were happiness, and if your desire were to attain the kingdom, then you should acquire virtue, and toil for its acquisition. You will then rejoice at Christ's indwelling you. Scrutinize your life, in order to identify the recurring sin plaguing you, then seek and acquire the counteracting virtue. If pride were your ailment, then learn meekness. If defilement were attacking you, then seek purity.....In this regard, your confessor's guidance should be quite beneficial.*

### **(III) The Christian's mission (vs. 13 - 16)**

***"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."*** (Matthew 5:13 - 16)

Christ likened His children unto "salt," which salts the earth; in turn, the "earth"

symbolizes earthly humans fully attached to the world. Salt is characterized by dissolving in food, enhancing its taste, while leaving its savouriness unaffected. Analogously, a Christian influences others, leading them to a better lifestyle, without losing their individuality.

Salt is cheap, abundant, and readily available worldwide. Similarly, a humble Christian's service extends to everyone. Salt is white, symbolizing chastity and purity. Finally, salt preserves food against decay, as a Christian preserves himself and those around him, edifying them in a godly lifestyle. The real problem is *rotten salt*, on which we rely for rectifying everyone's path. When does salt become rotten?

1. If mixed with foreign substances thus weakening its effect - like the Christian who associates with evildoers and becomes influenced by them.
2. If infiltrated by humidity thus diluting its flavor - this refers to languishing in luxury and carnal excesses.
3. If mixed with water and subjected to an electrical current - salt is then transformed into harmful substances like caustic soda - this symbolizes a Christian's submission to the world's evil forces, such as clinging to the love of money, and other lustful desires. In turn, those dominate his heart, and alter his temperament, transforming him into an offence to those looking up to him, thus harming and corrupting them.

In this case, the problem becomes evident: *With what, or how, can we salt, and correct others?* Put differently, what should we do with this rotten salt? Its usefulness and aim in life have been lost; its only fate is thus to be cast out of the kingdom, and to be trodden underfoot - eternal torment – and endless crushing.

#### **V. 14:**

A Christian is likened unto *the light*, whose task is to illuminate the way for others; he is characterized by the following:

1. He guides others throughout their lives.
2. He reveals to them all evil and harm, enabling them to avoid it.
3. He helps them to do well - openly in the light not secretly in darkness.
4. Light is powerful and does not fear darkness - evil - rather, light gives flight to darkness.

It is thus imperative for a Christian to lead a sublime spiritual life - as a city built on a hill; its light cannot be concealed, just like the moon that lights up the world by reflecting the sun's rays - which are God. Christ thus demands that we illuminate the entire world through our upright life.

#### **V. 15:**

Christ also likens a Christian's life unto a lamp, whose purpose is to illuminate the house. It would thus be positioned in a high location to provide light for the entire house. It is illogical to hide the lamp's light by covering it with a bowl or a measuring cup.

**"A basket:"** This is usually used as a container for grains or the like. Placing it over the

lamp would totally conceal its light. This symbolizes materialistic preoccupations, logical deductions and worldly issues, which impede the light, *"the light of the Holy Spirit's action within us,"* from shining to others.

#### **V. 16:**

We are required to set the example for others in good deeds, so that they may see in us Christ and His Holy Spirit's work, inducing them to praise God, and to be attracted towards a godly lifestyle. The objective of our good deeds should neither be pride, nor praise from others, nor self-glorification; rather, we live righteously for God's sake as an example to others. In this way, we attract hearts towards loving God.

+ *You have an essential role to play in the world, namely, to reveal Christ in your speech and deeds wherever you go. At the end of each day ask yourself: "Has Christ been manifested in my home, in my work, and in every place to which I have been?" This will lead you to repent and scrutinize your conduct. You will thus win yourself and those around you.*

#### **(IV) Fulfillment of the law (vs. 17 - 20)**

***"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."*** (Matthew 5:17 - 20)

#### **Vs. 17 & 18:**

Christ is God; He authored the law. Consequently, it is illogical for Him to refute what He had instituted. Rather, He was incarnate to fulfill it. *How?*

a- All the Old Testament symbolisms and prophecies were realized in the law, according to Matthew the Evangelist's assertion: ***".....that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets....."***

b- Christ Himself fulfills the entire law on our behalf, due to our failure to fulfill it, according to what He told John the Baptist: ***".....it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."*** (Matthew 3:15)

c- He fulfills the law in our lives through the power of His Holy Spirit; having failed to do so ourselves using our own strength, the Holy Spirit supports and empowers us.

d- He fulfilled all the commandments' intricacies, citing their underpinnings so that we may avoid committing them. For example, anger instigates murder, and adultery starts with an evil glance.

***"The Law or the Prophets:"*** Here, Christ is referring to the entire Old Testament.

**"Assuredly:"** This means "Amen." Its intent is confirmation of what He would proclaim in the verse.

**"Heaven and earth:"** This expression refers to the most stable things in the world, to clarify the firmness of the word of God in the Holy Bible unto the end of time.

**"One jot or one tittle:"** This refers to the impossibility of changing even the least teaching.

**"Till all is fulfilled:"** This means until completion of God's plan to save His children on judgment day, and completion of applying all the law, through glorification of God's children and torment of the wicked.

### **Vs. 19 & 20:**

The scribes and Pharisees used to memorize the law literally. However, their deeds broke it. Although literal application is important, applying the law practically is even more important. Whoever ignores the least commandment, and teaches such practice, will be the least and most contemptible person in the New Testament's kingdom - namely, the Church; he must repent without delay to avoid losing his eternity. This is because refuting, and deliberately rejecting, any of the commandments, is tantamount to rejecting all of them. On the other hand, whoever errs due to weakness has recourse in the sacrament of penance, which wipes away all sins through repentance.

Furthermore, great indeed, in the Church and the eternal kingdom, are those whose daily life fully reflects their teaching of the commandments. Christ subsequently calls on His followers to ensure that their righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. Hence, rather than contenting themselves with simply memorizing the letter of the law, they should apply its precepts practically in their life. That is because applying the law is a prerequisite for access to the kingdom of heaven.

**"The least of these commandments:"** Those are the ones addressing distancing ourselves from something in particular, or scrutinizing a minor issue. Those are as important as the significant commandments, such as the ten commandments.

**"The scribes and Pharisees:"** The prevailing conviction among the Jews, was that since members of these two classes were highly knowledgeable, they must represent the best example of godly lifestyles. Christ clarified that anyone seeking salvation must exceed such theoretical righteousness.

+ *May you apply in your life what you say, prior to teaching others. You will then experience, and acquire, its blessings, and what you say will have a greater effect on your audience. God has granted you all your spiritual knowledge before imparting it to others. Therefore, accept and apply what you hear and read. In this way you will save your and others' souls, since your life will reflect, effortlessly, the upright conduct to be followed by others.*

### **(V) Murder (vs. 21 - 26)**

**"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever**

*murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny."* (Matthew 5:21 - 26)

#### **V. 21 & 22:**

Having addressed a Christian's positive attributes and their rewards, Christ now directs His discourse towards adverse sins, and the means for treating them. As an example, He picks a difficult commandment, namely, "***You shall not murder;***" He went straight to its root cause, which is the sin of "*anger*" - avoiding anger would naturally lead to elimination of the potential for murder. The scribes, Pharisees, and Jewish elders, used to punish anyone who murdered willfully. But those who committed unpremeditated murder fled to the designated cities of refuge. No attention was paid to internal anger - rather, outward manifestation thereof by murder, was punishable. In order to emphasize the seriousness of internal anger, Christ said, "***Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause....,***" meaning, anger over perishing or evanescent material issues, merits sentencing by the lower, or lesser, courts; those were established in Jewish towns, each presided by twenty-three judges, chosen from among the elders. Such sentencing may be appealed in the higher courts, the most significant being the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, which consisted of seventy sages, chosen from among senior Jewish rabbis - also labelled "the council of seventy;" all the other courts were subservient to it. It was the highest Jewish authority, making decisions in Jewish religious matters - many of the scribes served on it.

In this context, "anger" means heart-felt, internal anger, without exhibiting any outward expressions. Christ continued, saying, "***And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!'...."*** The term "***Raca***" is a Syriac word expressing disdain associated with anger.

Whoever addresses his brother by that term deserves the council's sentencing - "council" refers to the Sanhedrin, which comprises Jewish elders from Jerusalem.

But whoever persists in his anger, accusing his brother of folly and stupidity, deserves "***hell fire.***"

"***Hell***" is taken from "*Hinnom Valley*" (or "Gehenna" in Greek). That was the place where remains of offerings were cast - subsequently infested with worms and eventually burnt. The fire in that valley was never extinguished. For this reason, God likened eternal torment unto the everlasting fire and worms of Hinnom - but harsher and more agonizing from a spiritual perspective.

Thus, Christ's abhorrence of anger and its associated risks is evinced. Even internal anger and any expression thereof, merits sentencing before God, and will lead to eternal perdition.

### **Vs. 23 & 24:**

Christ proclaims clearly that God rejects prayers or offerings from an angry person, from someone mistreating others, or from anyone bearing grudges. This is because God desires prayers offered from a pure, love-filled, heart. When, upon presenting an offering to God, a Jew remembered a grudge against someone, he should cease his offering, and be reconciled to his brother a priori, then resume his offering, in order that it may be acceptable to God.

***"..and there remember that your brother has something against you.. :"***

Christ did not say *"you have something against him;"* your dues should therefore take precedence over your rights.

***"Leave...:"*** He emphasizes that reconciliation, and offering love, are more important than worship. Worship through a pure, love-filled, heart is acceptable to God.

***"Go...:"*** This means that you should be more concerned with being reconciled to your brother, even if he had wronged you. Christ Himself emphasized this saying, ***"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone....."*** (Matthew 18:15)

+ *All anger must be expunged from the heart before approaching prayer*  
- *whether at home or in church. This is especially true during communion - since prayers from an impure heart are rejected. Hasten your reconciliation to others - even those who had wronged you - win them over through love. Let not their pride or harshness perturb you, rather, pray for them, so that anger may be wrenched from their hearts. Let your peace be your first priority.*

### **Vs. 25 & 26:**

Your ***"adversary"*** is God's commandments, or your conscience that reminds you of God's words, or the Holy Spirit indwelling you. Falling into sin renders them your adversaries.

***"The way:"*** This is our present life. You will save yourself, and be reconciled to your adversary, upon submitting to the voice of the Holy Spirit, heeding your conscience, obeying God's commandment, and distancing yourself from all anger, malice and evil. Failing to reconcile yourself to him through submission and repentance, he will deliver you to the ***"judge"*** - Who is God the just Judge - on judgment day. He will condemn you to eternal perdition, and deliver you to the ***"officer"*** - the angels - who will cast you in prison, which is eternal torment. ***"You will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny [all your debts even the least one]"*** - the penalty for sin is boundless, since sin is unlimited, being committed against the infinite God; consequently, you will remain in eternal torment.

+ *Beware of the sin of anger - do not indulge in it by yielding to excuses. Have pity on others, regardless of their faults; in this way, you will protect yourself against anger's evil consequences, regain your peace, resume your spiritual advance towards the kingdom, and win the souls of those around you.*

**(VI) Adultery (vs. 27 - 30)**

*"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."* (Matthew 5:27 - 30)

**Vs. 27 & 28:**

Adultery is glancing/looking with a lustful intent. This generates lustful pleasure in the mind which, in turn, leads to falling into the act's various forms. For this reason, Christ desired to eradicate the roots of this sin, originating in the sense of sight, clarifying that looking lustfully constitutes adultery. This aims to induce us to be strict with respect to lustful looking, thinking, or feeling, believing that this is "normal." This will lead us to indulge in this trend, and consider that even evil touching is "normal." Having fallen into the full act of adultery, we would then excuse ourselves, thus fully closing the door to repentance - for being lenient with, and justifying, sin.

+ *O man of God! Flee from unnecessary glances - lest you should fall into evil looks. Flee from them as you would flee from a snake or a scorpion.*

**Vs. 29 & 30:**

Man's weakness makes him liable to fall by looks or by deeds, our Lord says: *"If your fall were due to an evil glance, then pluck out your right eye which had caused your fall in the sin of adultery. If you stole, then cut off your right hand which had caused your fall."*

The intent here is not the literal meaning - of course there is no difference between the right and left eyes. Rather, "right" symbolizes power and importance, and refers to the very close friend, or the overwhelming lustful desire, or anything dear to you, such as your eye or hand - you should distance yourself from it, and sever any links with it, to guard yourself against falling into sin, leading to your eternal torment.

+ *Dear brother, do examine yourself, and abandon, and distance, yourself from all instigators of your fall into sin - whether adultery or any other sin - however dear it may be to you; this secures your salvation and eternity.*

**(VII) Divorce (vs. 31 - 32)**

***"Furthermore it has been said, 'whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery."*** (Matthew 5:31 & 32)

**Vs. 31 & 32:**

***"Certificate of divorce:"*** The husband sits with one of the scribes, and writes a deposition for divorce. This gives the wife the freedom of becoming attached to another man. In the pagan world, divorce was permitted for any reason. This practice was especially common among the Greeks, in whose temples promiscuity and adultery were rampant. On the other hand, a Jew had to reconsider and write the certificate of divorce; he could recant, upon feeling that his wife would become another man's - his anger and anxiety would subside. Christ, though, accentuates the grandeur of the sacrament of holy matrimony - namely, it is a union that cannot be undone, except in the case of adultery by one of the spouses; in that case, the spouse would have effectively severed the union with the other. Whoever divorces his wife for any other reason causes her to commit adultery, in the event that she attaches herself to another man because, before God, she remains the former man's wife. The new husband would be an adulterer, since he would have married another man's wife. Mosaic Law, given in Deuteronomy 24:1, permitted divorce if accompanied by a certificate. Due to the Israelites' mixing with the Egyptians who were accustomed to divorce, Moses felt compelled to set rules for divorce, by stipulating that a man should reconsider and write a certificate to this effect. In this context, Christ did not oppose Mosaic Law, rather, He aimed to return marriage to its original intent; God did not create man and woman, permitting their divorce - rather, uniting them through the sacrament of holy matrimony, hence: ***"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."*** (Genesis 2:24) Divorce is permitted solely in the case of adultery, since that separates the ***"one flesh"*** of the two spouses, one of them having been united with someone else.

+ *Let us sanctify the sacrament of holy matrimony. Let us transcend all differences, and try resolving them through spiritual guidance, repentance, and adherence to the Church.*

**(VIII) Oaths (vs. 33 - 37)**

***"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."*** (Matthew 5:33 - 37)

### **V. 33:**

In olden times, God permitted His people to take oaths in His name, in order to orient their hearts towards worshipping Him, rather than taking oaths in the names of pagan idols. God forbade them to "*swear falsely.*" This means they were required to fulfill their oaths, such as tithing; whatever was promised to God must be fulfilled.

The scribes and Pharisees taught that oaths taken in the name of God are the only ones which must be fulfilled; but an oath taken in the name of anything else may be recanted. Clearly, this is erroneous teaching, which Christ opposed and corrected in the following verses, teaching that swearing is not permitted under any circumstances.

### **Vs. 34 - 37:**

The law was perfected in the New Testament by forbidding oaths. This is because the name of God is more sublime than to be used in material transactions. Rather, its use must be solely for worship and blessing our life. "**God's throne:**" Heaven symbolizes God's presence, since it transcends everything and is befitting for God's sublimation. "**His footstool:**" The earth and terrestrials are lower than heaven - they were thus labelled "*God's footstool.*" Put differently, we are simply stewards in this world - we own nothing therein. How, then, can we swear by something which we do not own? God alone is capable of swearing, since He owns everything. Furthermore, Christ avers that we neither own a single hair of our head, nor are capable of changing its color. Consequently, it is not meet to swear by the life of any person, nor by any creature in the world. For this reason, Christ requires us to use simple language devoid of oaths. We do not need to confirm our answers with oaths - rather, our responses to others should be just "yes" or "no."

"*...let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'....:*" We must not swear. Our conversations, opinions and assertions to others should simply be truthful "positives" or "negatives" without resorting to swearing.

"*...from the evil one....:*" Swearing is provoked by Satan. Being the father of all lies and dishonesty, he instigates humans to swear in order to prove their lies. The absence of oaths is a means for controlling anger, thus evading binding decisions. It is an attribute reflecting Christian innocence. Swearing does not constitute proof of truthfulness.

Rather, evildoers use it to achieve their goals through lies.

+ *Choose your words meticulously, using God's name for blessings. Distance yourself from lies - then you will be in no need of proving what you say through vain oaths.*

*Refrain from becoming used to taking the name of the Lord, or people's lives, lightly, through irresponsible swearing.*

### **(IX) Countering evil with good (vs. 38 - 42)**

***'You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the***

*other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."*  
(Matthew 5:38 - 42)

#### **V. 38:**

In the Old Testament, God intended to instill in people's minds the notions of Divine justice, the need for redemption, and a person's need for another person to redeem him for his faults. Therefore, an eye redeems an eye, and a tooth is redeemed by a similar tooth. Since sin is boundless, being aimed at God, it required unlimited redemption, through the death of the incarnate God - Christ our Lord. Another intent of the commandment "*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" was to ensure that people did not retaliate against evil by a greater one - rather, retaliation's magnitude should be proportional to the offence. Such were the Old Testament's commandments - because people's level of comprehension, back then, could not absorb anything more sublime. When responding to evil, a spiritually mature person, progresses through six stages:

1. Aggressing others wickedly - this is the uncivilized, barbaric, approach.
2. Responding to evil by a greater one - since it was started by the other party.
3. Responding to evil by an equivalent one - that is in accordance with Jewish law.
4. Responding to evil by a lesser one - this reflects self-control.
5. Ignoring evil - maintaining silence - this reflects full self-control.
6. Responding to evil with good - this is the Christian, the highest, level.

#### **V. 39:**

Christ alerts us to ensure that our hearts remain unperturbed. A perturbed heart will respond to evil likewise. On the other hand, a love-filled heart will seek excuses for the offending party, thereby remaining undisturbed by any bodily harm - hence, a slap on the cheek. The intent here is not the literal meaning of "slapping." In any case, a person would normally be slapped on his left, not right, cheek - unless the slapping party was left-handed. Rather, the intent here is the spiritual meaning, namely, tolerance and forgiveness; continued tolerance, by accepting a second slap, means accepting further mistreatment.

#### **V. 40:**

Christ gives another example of tolerance and forgiveness, namely, dealing with someone attempting to rob you of your garment during a dispute. "*Tunic*" - This is the inner garment. The law stipulates that no one should take it since it is the poor man's cover (Exodus 22:26 & 27.)

"*Cloak*" - This is the outer, more expensive, garment. Thus, regardless of oppression's severity, we respond with love, while giving more than what the oppressor sought. Such demeanor will shame the oppressor and calm his anger. This, in turn, can only be

achieved through a love-filled heart and satiation with God, which leads to forfeit easily any attachment to material acquisitions. Initially, the offending party may assume that they had gained the upper hand - but such overwhelming love will amaze them. It represents silent evangelism to evildoers calling them to repentance, plus confidence in God's abundant reward not only in heaven, but also here on earth. God's promise is clear: ***"Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time....and in the age to come, eternal life."***  
(Mark 10:29 & 30)

**V. 41:**

***"Whoever compels you.....? :"*** This refers to free (unpaid) labor. Offer an even greater service to whoever compels you to work. This way, your love will win him over - not to mention earning you heavenly blessings.

***"Go with him two.....:"*** The second mile refers to love, with which you extinguish others' oppression and evil.

**V. 42:**

Give the needy, whom you encounter - when asked. This action represents nullifying your love of money, apathy towards others, and assertion that you do not consider them greedy. You should tolerate them, since greed may be the product of deprivation. A needy person may be too shy to ask for charitable donations; he may thus ask for a loan, knowing that he would be unable to repay it. Do not demand payment - rather, consider it a donation and an expression of your love. Of course, all the above depends on the degree of love in your heart. If such love were beyond your means, you should at least tolerate and forgive that person. Be neither selfish nor stingy in your donations - because God said clearly: ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."***(v.7) + *Your belief in love enables you to extinguish all the flames of evil residing in those around you. Love is stronger than hate. Have pity, through your love, on the wrathful and greedy. They are afflicted in need of a balm - which is love. Love can be offered either by tolerating and praying for them, or speaking to them tenderly despite their harshness, or offering them services. A heart saturated with love for God is a prerequisite for tolerating and loving them. Assign a high priority to your relationship with God, and seek His help; you will thus derive love from Him that overflows over others.*

**(X) Loving our enemies (vs. 43 - 48)**

***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 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, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."* (Matthew 5:43 - 48)

**V. 43:**

**"Your neighbor:"** The Pharisees considered "your neighbor" to be the Jew. However, according to Christ, all humans are our neighbors (see parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10:30 - 37.)

Old Testament law required loving one's neighbor, in order to shed one's selfishness, and to love relatives and close friends. **"Hate your enemy:"** The law had not required this; rather, it was added by the Pharisees. They could have deduced it from God's commandment to expunge the wicked from the Promised Land- meaning eradicating evil from the land.

On the other hand, the law did not only stipulate helping the enemy's donkey straining under its burden (Exodus 23:4 & 5), but it also forbade hating the Edomites, being the Israelites' relatives, and forbade hating the Egyptians, having been hosts to the Israelites, although they had humiliated and fought against them, and were their bitter enemies (Deuteronomy 23:7.)

**V. 44:**

The spiritual maturity heralded by the New Testament required the law to demand loving one's enemies. This is because the God-created nature within them is pure - their wickedness is an intrusion promulgated by Satan. Thus, we should not regard them as evildoers, rather as ailing patients in need of love and pity. We should silence their evil language through words of kindness. Doing good for them will calm their hearts. Finally, we should pray for them, in order for God to purge their evil thoughts. In this way we can win them over as friends in faith and love.

**"Bless:"** Love is not limited to internal sentiments - rather, it is manifested in words of kindness and encouragement.

**"Do good:"** Love is also linked to service to those who have fallen in the trap of hatred towards us.

**"Pray:"** This is the least manifestation of love, or the sole means, which cannot be hindered; our enemies may refuse talking to us or may reject our services - but they cannot prevent our praying for them, regardless of the extent of their persecution.

**V. 45:**

**"The sons of your Father in heaven:"** God is love. In order to prove this sonship, we must love everyone, including evildoers and troublemakers. This love likens us unto God, Who loved us and died for us on the Cross - although we disobeyed Him,

challenged Him and crucified Him. God showers His bounties, and His sun shines, over all mankind indiscriminately - believers and unbelievers. His rains offer water for everyone's subsistence. He used the sun and rains due to their usefulness to all mankind. They are also in heaven, symbolizing God's heavenly bounties.

+ *Since God shines over, and satiates, everyone, offer your love to everyone you encounter. Ignore your own self, and endure suffering for Christ's sake, regardless of the extent of others' mistreatment.*

**Vs. 46 & 47:**

**"Tax collectors:"** They used to collect taxes for the Roman state. They were characterized by greed and cruelty. They were society's worst community. Their name was synonymous with evildoers. Christ states clearly that it is quite normal to love those who love us. Evildoers, represented by the cruel tax collectors, do the same. But our distinguishing attributes as Christians, is loving, offering peace, and doing good to those who mistreat and abuse us.

**"If you greet your brethren only:"** Mosaic Law forbade greeting Gentiles. Greeting was only permitted among Jews. This means that love was limited, failing to include all humans. New Testament law demands love for everyone.

**V. 48:**

**"Therefore you shall be perfect:"** This means seek perfection. Christ avers that this constitutes love's perfection - hence, loving our enemies. Thus, we become children of our perfect God. He invites us to seek perfection - whose full extent is unattainable. However, since God is perfect, He rejoices at this quest, since it implies a quest towards Him.

## Chapter 6

### Continuation of the Sermon on the Mount spiritual practices – impartiality

*(I) Charitable deeds (vs. 1 - 4)*

*"Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly."* (Matthew 6:1 - 4)

**Vs. 1 & 2:**

In these verses, Christ addresses worship's fundamental tenets, namely, charitable deeds, prayer and fasting. He started with charitable deeds as an extension to His previous discourse about offering love, and doing good deeds, to everyone - even to enemies. He lays down an essential condition, in order for charitable deeds to be accepted: their objective must be pleasing God, rather than attracting people's praise. Praise from fellowmen eliminates Divine rewards. In olden times, hypocrites never performed charitable deeds out of love of God or the needy; rather, it was for their own personal glorification - thus they sounded the trumpets, so that people may gather, witness their great deeds, and shower them with praise.

*"Your Father in heaven:*

He means God, Who transcends above all the hypocrites' terrestrial, perishing thoughts, and for Whom we prepare ourselves in order to be with Him in eternity, reaping the reward of our righteous life on earth, through the eternal heavenly inheritance.

*"The hypocrites:"*

They are those whose sentiments and intentions are contrary to what they manifest outwardly. Hence, they appear to be merciful when, in fact, they are proud, seeking people's praise. Here, Christ is referring to the scribes and Pharisees.

*"In the synagogues and in the streets:"*

These are the most crowded places, offering a greater chance of praise from more people.

**Vs. 3 & 4:**

*"Your left:* This symbolizes giving for the purpose of acquiring people's praise.

*"Your right:"* This symbolizes blessing and obeying the commandments - put differently, giving in order to please God. Another intent is giving secretly - hence, being concealed even from those closest to us, as close as one hand to the other. Only then would the charitable deed be for God alone, leading to eternal reward - for all creation to see. Furthermore, God will bless us, openly, in our life on earth.

This neither means that we are discouraged to give in the presence of onlookers, nor that

we should not give if privacy is not possible. Rather, we should have the spirit of giving in secret, without being preoccupied with others' views.

+ *Take care of the needy who are unable to ask openly. They may be inconspicuous, but they could be the neediest. Thank God for allowing you to give Him in the form of those needy people.*

### **(II) Prayer (vs. 5 - 8)**

***"And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."*** (Matthew 6:5 - 8)

### **Vs. 5 & 6:**

Christ did not give us any details about individual or group prayer - rather, He left those details for the Church to organize through the guidance of His Holy Spirit.

However, He did address the essence of prayer; namely, it should be a loving personal relationship between man and God. How then can such a relationship be paraded publicly aiming to gain people's praise, whether in crowded places such as synagogues thus attracting the attention of all present, or at street corners in full view of passers-by? In this way you will win people's praise, and lose your eternal reward.

For this reason, God's children must pray privately, behind closed doors, to avoid being seen by anyone. In this context, the heart's doors are more important than material doors; since, even behind closed doors, God's blessing will be hindered by a heart desiring people's praise. On the other hand, we should not be concerned if others observed us praying – whether in church or elsewhere - at issue here is the heart: it should not yearn for people's praise or glory.

### **Vs. 7 & 8:**

In olden times, both in pagan and Jewish worship, some believed that prayers would be answered if repeated several times. Such beliefs are false - repetition is useless. However, sound repetition consists of humble and faithful supplication to God, with understanding - not mere verbosity. Christ avers that God is fully aware of our needs, thus rendering repetition unnecessary. God does listen - but all He expects from us is our coming forward and opening our hearts to Him; His overflowing mercies will inundate us - simply when we ask Him - for He loves us, He is aware of our needs, and He desires to give us, only if we loved Him and asked Him.

+ *If, while praying, you became fixated on people's opinions about you, and they admired your words, you will have earned your reward on earth, invalidating prayer before God. Open your heart in your private chamber, or away from prying eyes, in order to express all your sentiments with words, tears and prostrations. Your heart will thus find solace in the grace of God, Who hears your prayer - which gladdens Him.*

**(III) The Lord's Prayer (vs. 9 - 15)**

***"In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. 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. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*** (Matthew 6:9 - 15)

**V. 9:**

Christ Himself presented us with the example which we must follow in all our prayers; this is the Lord's Prayer, which we recite often before, during, and at the end of our prayers. The Lord's Prayer starts with three petitions, aimed at glorifying the name of God. They are petitions expressing love for the Person of God, while extending to perfection in eternity. These are followed by three other petitions addressing our material needs, teaching us how to honor and glorify God, prior to requesting anything for ourselves.

***"Our Father:"***

This prayer starts by manifesting our special sonship to God - therefore, we start by expressing this intimacy. As children of the Father Who transcends all sins we, terrestrials, must conduct ourselves in celestials' purity. He is not sublime in the perceived heavens - rather, He indwells our hearts, having become heaven, through the purification of repentance and His love.

***"Hallowed be Your name:"***

God's name embodies "the fullness of God." A person's name indicates the person's essence. We do not seek God's holiness, since He is all-holy in essence. Rather, we seek to hallow Him in our lives and perception, by purifying our hearts and dedicating them to Him, rendering them fit for His indwelling. Consequently, we reject all evil through repentance, and prepare our hearts for prayers, meditations, and every good deed.

**V. 10:**

***"Your kingdom come:"***

God owns everything in the world. However, we do ask Him to reign over our hearts, in order for us to enjoy His fatherhood, shepherding and love. Thus, we expel all sins controlling our lives, and break away from all terrestrial attachments. This also refers to our yearning for the heavenly kingdom in eternity, where God's reign over our hearts is unobstructed, and our joy complete.

***"Your will be done:"***

Being God's children, we seek His will - not ours, since our will is liable to errors, while His is always perfect for our benefit. God, through His fatherhood, consistently seeks what is beneficial for us, and our final attainment of His joyful eternity.

***"On earth as it is in heaven:"***

Angels in heaven submit to God. We aim to obey Him on earth as they do in heaven. In this way, the struggle between flesh and spirit is arrested, and our enjoyment of God is

uninterrupted. Therefore, our desire is that our terrestrial life be transformed into a celestial one, where flesh and blood are harmonious in loving and serving God. Heaven is also a symbol of holiness. As saints seek God's will throughout their lives, we would also like to follow their example. Finally, heaven refers to faith, in the spiritual sense - hence, believers rejoice in living with God. We pray that the entire world be transformed into believers - this becoming heaven.

**V. 11:**

**"Our daily bread:"**

This is sometimes translated as "our bread that is for the morrow," "our forthcoming bread," or "our basic bread."

**"Daily:"** This means the bread that satisfies our need today - without being worried or concerned about tomorrow. *"Our bread that is for the morrow, or our forthcoming bread:"* This refers to our heavenly, spiritual nutrition. We need to savor it here on earth. *"Our basic bread:"* This is the more important spiritual food, being distinct from the material, perishing food. All those translations refer to a single spiritual notion; namely, give us the necessary bread, hence:

a-	Our daily material needs, and we will not be concerned about the
Morrow since we trust Your shepherding, You will consistently satisfy our needs such that our heart's preoccupation is solely to love You.	
b-	The word of God through the holy Bible, plus prayers and lauds - these
Satiate us more than material food.	
c-	Partaking of the holy communion - whether daily or weekly.

The preceding interpretations tell us that the bread, whether spiritual or material, is a deposit allowing us to savor heaven on earth, so that we may consistently yearn for heaven. We savor the material bread since it is a gift from our heavenly Father; we also savor the bread by experiencing Christ's daily presence with us through His manifestations of grace, and through the Holy Communion.

**V. 12:**

Asking for forgiveness of our sins is a clear admission that we are sinners offering repentance before God, confident of His forgiveness, and His love that will not reject us. Asking for forgiveness is also an admission of our weakness, and of our constant need for forgiveness. Although our nature has been renewed in baptism, we are still liable to fall into sin any day - we receive forgiveness through the prayer of repentance and the sacrament of confession.

The Lord's Prayer lays down a condition for receiving forgiveness, namely, loving others and forgiving their sins against us - because it is impossible for God to forgive a cruel, spiteful, judgmental heart. Since God is willing to forgive sins committed against Him - boundless sins, since He is limitless - it is incumbent on us to forgive those who wrong us, given their limited wrongdoings, and given our limited nature. By forgiving others, you earn much, namely, forgiveness of your unlimited sins. Forgiving your brother purifies your heart, qualifying it for God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness though, requires a priori, repentance.

#### **V. 13:**

***"Do not lead us into temptation:"***

This is a statement emphasizing our humility and acknowledgement of weakness, inducing us to ask God to distance temptations from us. However, if God's will permitted trials to befall us then we ask God to: ***"Deliver us from the evil one:"*** In other words, do not allow Satan to assume control over us, and do not forsake us and do not leave us fall into temptation - rather, with Your help, we endure it and emerge cleansed from it, and more virtuous. True temptations are not mere trials - they include falling into sin and being distanced from God. That is precisely the reason for asking God's protection. The Lord's Prayer concludes with glorifying God, and confessing: ***"For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."***

***"The kingdom:"*** God reigns over the heart - as asked previously in verse

***"The power:"*** This is confessing that God has the power to answer our prayers.

***"The glory:"*** God deserves honored glorification at all times. This confession implies submission to God, not simply by word of mouth, but also through deeds. The three latter petitions pertain to our life on earth. This is because in heaven, we will neither need material food, nor a deposit for the kingdom - since we will have attained it. Furthermore, there will be no sin, so we will not need forgiveness, and there will be neither temptations nor Satan to fear.

#### **Vs. 14 & 15:**

Due to the importance of loving others, God reiterates the necessity of forgiving them - otherwise we stand to lose all the Lord's prayer's blessings, and God's love for us.

It is repeated twice in those two verses due to its importance.

+ *May you fully absorb the implications of this prayer as you recite it daily. This will usher you into the privilege of sonship to God, seeking His glorification, while proclaiming your yearning for Him. Subsequently, your need for the Son, and your confidence in His love, will motivate you to ask of Him whatever you desire.*

**(IV) Fasting (vs. 16 - 18)**

*"Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."* (Matthew 6:16 - 18)

**V. 16:**

*"When you fast:"*

Fasting is as important and necessary as prayer and charitable deeds. Christ also addresses the manner in which to fast. On the other hand, He left the organization of group fasts to the apostles and forefathers of the earlier generations.

*"A sad countenance:"* During fasts, the scribes and Pharisees used to leave their faces unwashed, and cover their heads with ashes, in order to appear fasting before men - thus earning their praise.

*"They have their reward:"* This means that their fasting is worthless before God.

**V. 17:**

Conversely, Christ accentuated the importance of hiding the fact that we are fasting. Fasting is solely a loving personal relationship between man and God - sacrificing everything for that cause. For this reason, Christ requested that, while fasting, a person should retain his normal appearance, with a clean complexion and anointed head. From the spiritual standpoint, washing the face symbolizes purity from sin through repentance; anointing the head refers to the joy of being closer to God, coupled with the spiritual rites of the fast.

**V. 18:**

This accentuates the significance of Divine rewards for those who fast - hence, blessings on earth and eternal life - those rewards are similar to those in store for people who offer prayers and charitable deeds.

+ *You will lose your heavenly rewards by rebelling against fasting or any form of spiritual worship. Therefore ensure, as much as possible, that your fasting remains inconspicuous, since it is a relationship expressing love between you and God. At the same time, do not be perturbed by someone discovering that you are fasting - since such was not your quest.*

**(V) Heavenly and earthly treasures (vs. 19 - 21)**

*"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where*

***neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***" (Matthew 6:19 - 21)

**Vs. 19 - 20:**

Christ warns us against placing all our aspirations in terrestrials – which would lead us to fall into cherishing acquisitions - since all possessions are liable to perish, either by insects, rust, decay, or theft. In any case, worldly possessions are changeable and perishable. How, then, can we possibly place all our hope in something changeable and perishable??

At the same time, Christ calls us to the positive side of things, namely, that we store our treasures in heaven, away from any decay or changes. This is achieved through striving in holy worship and deeds of mercy. This in no way means that savings and investments catering to our needs and various projects are wrong; rather, it is wrong for our heart to be attached to, and dependent on, money.

**V. 21:**

The place where we store our treasures indicates the heart's desires and preoccupation. Heavenly treasures indicate that the heart is directed towards heaven, that our heart fosters and strengthens spiritual growth, and that the kingdom is our destination.

Conversely, being worldly and hoarding our treasures on earth, leads to perdition.

*+ Let not your dependence be on material acquisitions; rather, overcome them along with their variabilities. Simply use them as a tool to satisfy your needs without being attached to them. Be content with what you have, whether that is scarce or abundant. Be thankful at all times for God's bounties, confident that what He gave you satisfies your needs adequately. Ask Him for anything else you desire - but with submission and acceptance of His will. Thank Him for whatever He grants you; even if your wish were declined, thank Him for that, which is more important, namely, your love for Him.*

**(VI) The simple eye (vs. 22 & 23)**

***"The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"*** (Matthew 6:22 & 23)

**V. 22:**

Use of the term "**eye**" does not refer simply to our external sight - rather, the internal sight as well - meaning, the heart. A simple eye sees things at face value - as God does - and sees no evil. This means that a simple eye sees only that which is good, and does not seek excuses for faults, keeping its distance from them. In this case, the deeds - hence, the "**body**" – become enlightened, meaning "good."

## V. 23:

Consistently seeking faults to condemn, exposes us to falls - then our deeds become erroneous, hence, dark. The eye represents the entry point for goodness to the body. Put differently, the eye sees God in its surroundings, in turn, leading the body to do good deeds. On the other hand, an evil eye permits additional wickedness into the body, rendering that person's sins despicable.

+ *Ask yourself, how Christ would view matters, if He were in your place. This will enable you to see matters untarnished, devoid of any personal intent or erroneous notions. Do not trick yourself. Seek whatever is good around you and thank God for it. Having identified faults in others, pray for them, so that God may rectify their weaknesses. In this way, you will consistently see God around you: if good - that would be from Him, and if evil He would correct it.*

## **(VII) Love of money (vs. 24 - 34)**

***"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."*** (Matthew 6:24 - 34)

## V. 24:

***"Mammon"*** in this context refers to all worldly acquisitions, including food and raiment, and anything for which we use money to acquire or use. Money is a blessing from God. Being attached to it enslaves us to it, and separates us from worshipping God. Devotion to both is impossible. We either love God, or the world and its material possessions. When we love God, we expend all our energy for the glorification of His name. But loving wealth directs our entire life towards amassing it and reveling in it.

**V. 25:**

God avers the significance of life with Him, so that we evade wasting our lives seeking food and clothing, while being content with the least possible - dedicating our time to living with God, and enjoying life between His hands, proving that our life itself is more precious than all those perishing acquisitions. God, Who granted us this life and this body, is certainly capable of granting us our needs, which are less important.

**Vs. 26 & 27:**

God calls us to rely on Him, offering a second piece of evidence, namely, the birds soaring high up in the sky, singing His praise, with no concern either for their current needs or their future supplies. God provides them day by day. Naturally, God will provide humans with all their needs, upon depending on Him, since mankind is the summit of creation. Christ then gives a third piece of evidence: What were the benefits gleaned by those whose sole preoccupation was material issues? Have they been able to increase their height by a single arm-length (about half a meter)? God is the One Who determines the body's length and form, and keeps it, upon depending on Him.

**Vs. 28 - 30:**

God gives us a fourth piece of evidence urging us to rely on Him, namely, by contemplating the lilies of the field, and other beautiful flowers. However hard man may try, their beauty can never be matched. One example is King Solomon: despite his extensive wealth, his raiment could never match the beauty of those flowers. However, those beautiful flowers eventually wither, and are burnt in the oven. Man's worth to God is infinitely greater than those flowers. Thus, God cares and provides for all man's needs. By believing in God, regardless of man's available resources, God will provide all his needs - just as He bestows beauty on the flowers which are incapable of spinning or weaving. God bestows upon them a beautiful outlook; better than raiment produced by human hands.

**Vs. 31 - 33:**

To sum up, do not be like others, who are constantly preoccupied with their material needs. Rather, be confident that God, your heavenly Father, is fully aware of all your needs, and will provide them. Just be focused solely on seeking God's reign over your hearts, and on enjoying fellowship with Him, being confident that it is very easy for Him to take care of all other matters - in a much better way than your excessive preoccupation to do so. On the other hand, it is incumbent on us to discharge our duties and not yield to laziness.

**V. 34:**

From the above, it can be deduced that we are expected to discharge our daily duties, without being concerned with the future and its problems (its evil.) In this way, the heart is free to enjoy God - daily. He will provide for the morrow.

*+ Figure out how much time you spend taking care of material issues, versus time spent being with God....Never forget that your goal is God. Organize your day such that God is given priority. In all your undertakings, make sure that everything is pleasing to God: this includes your speech and thoughts. May you have spiritual ambitions and constructive thoughts, confident of God's provision and protection?*

## Chapter 7

### Continuation of the Sermon on the Mount refraining from judging others - obeying the commandments

*(I) Refraining from judging others - discernment (vs. 1 - 6)*

*"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces."* (Matthew 7:1 - 6)

**Vs. 1 & 2:**

Our Lord Christ alerts us to refrain from judging others, hence, from feeling irritated by their shortcomings, forgetting that we, too, are sinners, deserving judgment by God. On the other hand, humility earns us God's forgiveness. By finding excuses for others and being merciful to them, we receive God's mercy and forgiveness for our sins. Judging is not only being unrepentant while lacking love for others, but also it is a transgression of the authority of God the Judge, by replacing Him and judging others. Judging also harbors pride in the heart and disdain for the sinner. On the other hand, refraining from judging others does not imply that we lack discernment. It is incumbent on us to discern sin, to pray for the sinners, to love them, to seek excuses on their behalf, and to have fatherly pity for them. But we must distance ourselves from sin, and rebuke it to the extent possible. Thus we must dissociate sin from sinners: we hate sin, but love sinners.

*"The measure:"* This is a container for measuring volumes of grain. The intent here is the vessel which we fill with judgment then pour it over others. The same vessel will be used to pour Divine judgment against us. Often, God will permit us to commit the same sin, for which we had judged others – we would then repent and humble ourselves.

**Vs. 3 - 5:**

*"The speck:"* This is a small sliver of straw, symbolizing a minor sin.

*"The plank:"* This is a large piece of wood - much larger than a sliver. It obstructs vision and refers to a major sin.

Our Lord Christ likens someone else's sin unto a sliver in their eye, and likens my sin unto a plank in my eye. Consequently, I need to repent first in order to remove the plank from my eye, thus purifying my life to the extent that I can, through love and the action of the Holy Spirit, see the sliver in the otherperson's eye, meaning his sin, and help him rid himself of it.

On the other hand, ignoring the plank in my eye by being unrepentant, then brazenly judging others by hypocritically appearing to help them remove the sliver from their eye, is an impossible scenario: How can I possibly see the sliver in someone's eye, while the plank in my eye fully obstructs my view??

Fundamentally, judging others is motivated by pride, and unrepentance from our sins.

+ *To sum up: assign repentance a high daily priority - pray for others when they sin - seek excuses for them.*

## **V. 6:**

Integrity, loving others, and refraining from judging anyone, does not imply carelessly discussing the holy sacraments in church, and the work of the Holy Spirit before nonbelievers who fail to appreciate their importance. In olden times, church doors would be closed following the catechumens' exit, leaving only communicants behind.

**"The dogs:"** These refer to attacks, symbolizing opponents of the truth.

**"Swine:"** These refer to lack of understanding, since swine wallow in filth and defile everything - they symbolize disdain of the truth. Put differently, integrity is associated with treating others wisely.

Personal spiritual experiences also belong in the sacred category. They may be discussed solely with a person's confessor or, alternatively, without mentioning any names, in order to maintain our humility, and to shield such spiritual interactions from the indifference of others.

## **(II) Asking God (vs.7 - 12)**

***"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father Who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."*** (Matthew 7:7 - 12)

## **Vs. 7 & 8:**

Given His fatherly love, God desires to grant us everything. However, He gives only to those who appreciate His gifts, and demonstrate this appreciation when asking Him. God gives some gifts indiscriminately to everyone, like the sun, air, water, etc. However, because of His love, He desires to give even more. Whenever He finds us complacent about praying to Him, He motivates us to ask Him - so we receive. When He delays His response to test our faith, we should persist in our petition and find our needs in Him. When the Lord's door remains closed and we receive no response, we should knock until

He should open it, confident that He definitely answers all who pray to Him, as long as their prayers are for their own good, and in accordance with His will.

**Vs. 9 - 11:**

Christ offers logical proof of His fatherly love. Human fathers cater to their children's needs - a father would never give his children the opposite of what they had asked, provided that they asked for something useful and necessary. Hence, a son asking his father for bread would not receive a stone, and if he asked for a fish to eat he would not receive a snake. If such were the extent of love in human fatherhood, then how much more will be the love of God, the source of love and fatherhood, Who showers bounties on His children who trust Him, and ask Him for their needs??

**"You then, being evil:"** This is all humanity, because all are sinful - nevertheless, instinctively, they offer good gifts to their children.

**"Your Father Who is in heaven:"** This is a manifestation that God is the source of all love and tenderness.

**"Good gifts:"** This refers to any good gifts that children need.

**"To those who ask Him:"** This means those who are dependent on God, who adhere strictly to their prayers, and whose faith is steadfast.

+ *When God delays His response to you, never heed doubts that Satan plants; rather, persevere in your petitions, confident in God's love, and in His giving you, at the appropriate time, that which is for your own good.*

**V. 12:**

God's response to our petitions is contingent on our doing good deeds to others. We may expect good treatment by others only if we treated them well a priori. Loving others perfects the law and commandments.

+ *Upon encountering any person, picture yourself in their place; try to fathom what is expected of you, in order to offer their needs that may be love, care, or support. If someone mistreated you, do not hasten to respond in kind or judge them in your heart. Rather, be empathetic, sense their circumstances, excuse their behavior, and be tender, even if that were simply through a prayer for them.*

**(III) The narrow gate (vs. 13 & 14)**

***"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."*** (Matthew 7:13 & 14)

Our Lord Christ calls us to enter by the **"narrow gate,"** meaning to endure suffering for the kingdom's sake. He also warns us against the **"wide gate,"** and the broad comfortable path, which provides the entire world's luxuries and pleasures, but which leads to perdition. Regrettably, many prefer this deadlpath, drawn by the world's pleasures.

The "**narrow gate**" leads to salvation - which is the Cross. The "**difficult way**" is endurance of suffering - which is what Christ traversed for our sake. "**There are few who find it:**" The reason is not because the way to salvation is obscure and hidden from sight; rather, because people fail to find it, being lured away by the world's preoccupations and evil pleasures.

+ *In order for us to qualify as our Savior's disciples, it is imperative that we bear our cross behind Him. This means that, through repentance, we give up our evil desires, and we strip ourselves from worldly preoccupations. In this way our heart will be dedicated to loving God, allowing Him to reign over them now and forever.*

#### **(IV) False prophets (vs. 15 - 20)**

***"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them."*** (Matthew 7:15 - 20)

#### **V. 15:**

***"False prophets:"*** They are those whose teachings are contrary to the Church's, tricking people with their neat appearance, while their hearts harbor cruelty and inhumanity. They only consider that which serves their own purpose - not the glorification of God as they claim. Christ warns us to stay away from them and remain steadfast in the Church.

***"Sheep's clothing:"*** They are wolves having the appearance of sheep. This means that the simple-minded are snared by their hypocritical appearance of godliness and virtue, aiming to steer them away from the Church and its assemblies, seeking to induce their attachment to strange gatherings, and tricking them into believing that such, indeed, is the correct interpretation of the word of God.

#### **Vs. 16 - 18:**

The real intent of such false prophets is betrayed by their fruit, namely, their habits and deeds. This is because a cruel heart will be exposed in certain situations, regardless of its appearance.

***"Thornbrushes:"*** This represents lack of blessings while mistreating others. They will never attempt to sacrifice anything (symbolized by grapes which, when pressed, yield wine - meaning joy.) A cruel, selfish person will not sacrifice anything for the sake of others.

***"Thistles:"*** This is a dry plant similar to thornbrushes. It cannot yield figs.

***Figs:*** A fig consists of tiny seeds gathered through love within one envelope.

It symbolizes oneness and love. It is impossible for a person, withdrawn in the solitude of his selfishness, to unite with others in the oneness of love.

Naturally, a good tree, meaning a heart that loves God, will yield good fruit. Conversely, an evil person wreaks wickedness. It is imperative to change the heart through repentance, in order for the fruit to be good.

**Vs. 19 & 20:**

**"Thrown into the fire:"** Just as useless trees are normally burnt, the fate awaiting those false teachers is eternal fire. Our scrutiny must be meticulous prior to following any person. We must verify his conduct and virtues, he is a son of the Church, and his lifestyle is in accordance with the spiritual fathers.

+ *Treat those around you with discernment, while maintaining your love for them. Do not be led by false teachings contrary to the spirit of the Church. Do not participate in meetings which are not officially affiliated with the Church. Do not host strangers claiming that they will speak to you about God. Be steadfast in your church, holy sacraments, and spiritual assemblies, thus fostering your growth in the knowledge and love of God.*

**(V) Good deeds (vs. 21 - 23)**

**"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. 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?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"** (Matthew 7:21 - 23)

**"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,'....:"**

Those are people who do not apply Christ's commandments, despite their constant calling on His name, and their affiliation with Him. Repeating **"Lord"** refers to their emphasis on appearing to follow Christ.

**"He who does the will of My father:"** This refers to those who obey God, keep His commandments, and follow the Church's teachings.

**"That day:"** This is the last day - judgment day.

**"I never knew you:"** This means that He did not know them as His children, genuinely linked to Him.

Christ presents Himself as the Just Judge on the last day. He knows His true children, who had led a lifestyle in submission to Him, and in obedience to His commandments. God will reject those who assume that their God-given talents are proof of their salvation - He will cast them in eternal torment, because they had not used their God-given gifts to repent and to adhere to the love of God; examples of such gifts are casting out demons, performing miracles, and prophesying (spiritual teaching.) Talents are not proof of salvation, rather, fruit of the Holy Spirit - hence, virtues.

+ *Be honest in using your God-given talents, to lead you to repentance, the love of God, and the love of fellow humans.*

**(VI) Building on rock (vs. 24 - 27)**

***"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: 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. 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: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."***

(Matthew 7:24 - 27)

**Vs. 24 & 25:**

Christ concludes His sermon on the mount by emphasizing the importance of obeying His commandments - not simply hearing and admiring them.

**"A wise man:"** This is the person who scrutinizes his speech and watches his deeds meticulously. Whoever obeys the commandments is likened unto a man who, desiring to build a house digs deep into the ground until reaching bedrock. He then pours the foundation, and the building rises above ground. When the house is subsequently exposed to very strong winds, torrential rain, and flooding, it remains unaffected - because it was founded upon rock.

**"The rock:"** This is Christ, since He referred to Himself as ***"the cornerstone."***

(Matthew 21:42) St. Paul also referred to Christ as the foundation upon which the spiritual abode is built: ***"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."*** (1 Corinthians 3:11) Laying the foundation on Christ means having faith in Him, as a prerequisite for building our spiritual life, for being steadfast in the Church - His body - and for being joined unto Him through the holy sacraments.

**"The rain....the floods:"** These refer to worldly lusts.

**"The winds:"** These refer to hardships and Satan's wars. If those were to rise up against us, our life will remain unmoved, since we obey Christ's commandments.

**Vs. 26 & 27:**

**"A foolish man:"**

This is a person unwilling to understand, or to make an effort towards saving his soul. Whoever contents himself with just knowing Christ, without laboring in applying His commandments, is likened unto someone who does not wish to toil in digging deeply - meaning, someone who rejects bearing the cross, who prefers appearances, and whose knowledge of God and application of His commandments remain superficial.

**"The sand:"**

This symbolizes weak faith and the heresies' false substance, promising effortless salvation to people. Having rejected toil in applying the commandments, hardships and Satan's wars will result in collapse of their entire spiritual structure, and in their straying away from God. Eternal perdition awaits them.

**"Great:"**

This means man's complete breakdown, and eternal perdition.

+ *Be committed to a specific daily spiritual exercise, in order to transform the word of God which you read, into practical applications in your life.*

**(VII) The multitudes' astonishment (vs. 28 & 29)**

***"And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as One having authority, and not as the scribes."***

(Matthew 7:28 & 29)

***"As One having authority:"***

This is because, being man's Creator, He understands man's depths. He instituted the law, and His words are couched in the power of the Holy Spirit. The multitudes were significantly influenced by Christ's words during that sermon, because the words of their teachers, the Pharisees and scribes, lacked such power - the power of the Holy Spirit affecting the hearts. Christ's words affected the souls, since He lived, and was fully convinced of, what He said.

+ *Influencing others, requires application of what you say in your life, prior to teaching them.*

## Chapter 8

### Healing the sick - rebuking the wind

*(I) Healing the leper (vs. 1 - 4)*

*"When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.'" Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."* (Matthew 8:1 - 4)

**V. 1:**

Having been affected by His words, the multitudes' hearts clung to Him – so they followed Him to hear more of His sermons. Christ welcomed them, in order to strengthen their faith by performing miracles before them. On His way to Capernaum, He walked in the plain by the Sea of Tiberias.

**V. 2:**

Leprosy appears in the form of spots on the skin. In its advanced stages, the body may lose the affected parts. It is similar to other serious diseases. It symbolizes uncleanness. Complete isolation of infected persons, regardless of social standing, was required. Their heads had to be uncovered, and a man's moustache had to be covered. Furthermore, the infected person had to cry, "Unclean! Unclean!" to passers-by, to alert them to maintain their distance (Leviticus 13:45.) During Christ's descent from the mountain (which could be construed by some to be symbolic of Christ's loving condescension to heal our weaknesses and uncleanness), He cleansed a leprous Jew (here, again, this action could be symbolic of cleansing the Jewish nation from strange teachings, returning it to God's commandments.) The leper had lived in isolation; having heard of Christ's teachings and His power to heal diseases, he encountered Him outside the city limits.

*"And worshipped Him:"* This signals his humility before Christ, and his belief on Him.

*"If You are willing:"* This is a polite formulation when speaking to Christ, while submitting to His will.

*"You can:"* This reflects full confidence in Christ and in His healing powers.

*+ Have faith in God's power to forgive your sin; seek His help and He will liberate you from it and, regardless of your weakness. He will give you the feelings of repentance and confession.*

**V. 3:**

Christ ordered the leper to be cleansed. His action followed His words. He touched the

leper and he was cleansed instantly. His skin color changed and he became normal. Christ touched the leper in order to teach us to practice what we preach. He also proclaimed His authority and His purity that remains unaffected by touching uncleanness - rather, it purifies the unclean, because He is God, capable of purifying. Furthermore, by maintaining a pure heart in our lifestyle, we remain immune to defilement by evil, when circumstances compel us to face it in this world.

#### **V. 4:**

**"See that you tell no one:"** This is because Christ does not seek honor from people. Rather, His sole intent for performing miracles is edifying His teachings - not fascinating the multitudes. Christ also proclaimed that He did not contradict the law. Rather, He came to fulfill it - hence, He sent the leper whom He had healed, to offer a sacrifice according to the law, after being examined by the Jewish priests who would verify that indeed, he had been cured, and who should believe on Christ, after seeing for themselves that His power to heal was greater than theirs.

**"The gift:"** This is what the law stipulated: **"two living and clean birds"** (Leviticus 14:4)

#### **(II) Healing the centurion's servant (vs. 5 - 13)**

**"Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented.' And Jesus said to him, 'I will come and heal him.' 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. 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.'" 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! 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. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." 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." (Matthew 8:5 - 13)**

#### **Vs. 5 & 6:**

**"Came:"** From Luke 7:3, it would seem that he had dispatched Jewish elders to Christ in order to petition, in his name, healing of his servant. In this verse, the "coming" was attributed to him, since the elders were his emissaries.

**"The centurion:"** He was a leader of a Roman military formation consisting of one hundred troops, usually stationed in large towns such as Capernaum. Although a pagan, he was upright and he loved the Jews. Upon Christ's entry into the Galilean town of

Capernaum, a centurion came to Him asking that He heal one of his servants: a paralytic, lying at home. This demonstrates the centurion's tenderness and care for his servants. **"Dreadfully tormented:"** Extreme pain may accompany some types of paralysis. The servant may have also been tormented psychologically, due to his lying in bed, and his inability to move or take care of his necessities. This could symbolize the Gentiles' resorting to Christ, seeking deliverance from the spiritual paralysis which had afflicted them, and tormented their souls, as a result of their idolatry.

#### **V. 7:**

Christ's indiscriminate love for Gentiles and Jews, and willingness to enter their homes and heal them, is hereby evinced. He does not despise Gentiles. Humbly, He reached out to them - since He was incarnate for the salvation of the entire world.

**"I will come and heal him:"** This is a proclamation of Christ's perfect power to heal.

#### **Vs. 8 & 9:**

**"I am not worthy:"**

That centurion showed unexpected humility before Christ, given his high position, and the Romans' tendency to despise Jews.

**"Under my roof:"**

This is because Jews refrained from entering Gentiles' homes. The centurion did not want Christ to feel embarrassed by inviting Him to go and heal his servant. Thus, he humbly told Christ that he was unworthy for Christ to visit his home and heal his servant - at the same time; he proclaimed his faith that a single word from Christ would heal the servant. He was a centurion having authority over his troops - but Christ, the great God, has authority over everything.

**"A man under authority:"**

This means that he was under the authority of army generals having higher ranks than his and, ultimately, under Caesar's authority. Nevertheless, his servants still obeyed his commands. However, he believed that everything and everybody were under Christ's command.

#### **V. 10:**

Christ admired, and praised, that man's faith, declaring that his faith was greater than that manifested by any of the Jews. Our just God awards everyone with the honor they deserve.

#### **Vs. 11 & 12:**

**".....from east and west... :"**

This refers to the Gentiles, and constitutes a clear proclamation from Christ that His kingdom includes both Gentiles and Jews - adding that many Gentiles will believe and

precede the Jews to the kingdom, joining Abraham and other forefathers. Coincidentally many Jews, labelling themselves

*"sons of the kingdom,"* since God had chosen them as His chosen people, handing them His precepts and being born amongst them to save them, will reject the Faith, and will be cast into eternal torment outside the kingdom, expressed as *"outer darkness,"* due to the absence of Christ's light.

*"Gnashing of teeth:"* This represents torment, anger and hopelessness.

### **V. 13:**

Christ's word, at a distance, granted healing - the servant was healed instantly. The centurion's resultant joy was promulgated by his faith. This accentuates two important points:

1. Christ's ability to heal instantly.

2. The importance of intercession in God's view: evinced by Christ's response to the centurion's request concerning his servant.

+ *Kindly hasten to help anyone who seeks your aid. May you even have pity on the heavy-laden around you and help them before their asking. May you be prepared to expend every effort to help them, giving up your pride for their comfort's sake, confident that the greatest thing in God's view is being merciful to others.*

### **(III) Healing Simon's mother-in-law (vs. 14 - 17):**

*"Now when Jesus had come into Peter's house, He saw his wife's mother lying sick with a fever. So He touched her hand, and the fever left her. And she arose and served them. When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses." (Matthew 8:14 - 17)*

### **Vs. 14 & 15:**

*"Peter's house:"*

Peter had a house in Capernaum, although he hailed from Bethsaida.

*"His wife's mother:"*

Peter's having a wife did not deter him from following, and serving, Christ.

*"Lying sick with a fever:"*

The inference is that her sickness was severe - to the extent that she was unable to move or do any work.

*"He touched her hand:"*

This proclaims, in a tangible manner, Christ's ability to heal, and His being the source of the good health to be imparted to the sick person. We see here that Christ takes care of His servants. He takes care of all the needs of those who follow Him and rely on Him. He heals not only their afflictions, but also those of their families. Our Lord Christ awards

special care to His children - the servants. In this particular miracle we see Christ's care for women and His welcoming their service - hence, upon being healed, she served them. From the spiritual standpoint, one can consider the fever to be symbolic of spiritual ailments which impede the soul from having a lifestyle of service to the Lord. However, upon resorting to Him, the soul is healed, thus regaining its initial fervor.

#### **Vs. 16 & 17:**

The news of Christ's miracles spread throughout Capernaum. St. Mark tells us (Mark 1:21) that, being the Sabbath, they brought their sick to Christ in the evening, hence, after the day was over - since no work was permitted on the Sabbath (Mark 1:32). The sick had various ailments, ranging from mental disorders to being possessed by demons. He healed them all, tenderly and lovingly. He came to lift our afflictions, bearing all our pain on the Cross, and redeeming us, as Isaiah had prophesied (Isaiah 53:4).

*+ God searches for, and goes to, the heavy-laden, to heal them. Since He was incarnate to lift our weariness, we should resort to Him for all our needs, confident in His love, fatherhood, and ability to solve all our problems. Thus, we should not depend on our own mental prowess, or on that of those around us - those are all useless if not in God's hands. Our hearts should thus always be at ease, knowing His presence with us. We should have no concerns about the future.*

#### **(IV) Following Christ (vs. 18 - 22):**

*"And when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side. Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then another of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.""* (Matthew 8:18 - 22)

#### **V. 18:**

Great multitudes followed Jesus to enjoy His sermons and to witness His miracles. Therefore, He told His close circle of disciples to cross from the western shore of the Sea of Galilee to the eastern shore - a distance of about nine kilometers, which would take about two hours by boat. That would give Him the opportunity to preach elsewhere; it would also award Him and His disciples some time to rest. Finally, He wanted to escape from the Jews who wanted Him to be their earthly King, in order to liberate them from the Romans. His kingdom though, the kingdom of heaven, is infinitely greater.

#### **V. 19:**

On His way to board the boat, one of the scribes came to Him. It should be noted that the scribes had a high social standing among the Jews, due to their knowledge of the

scriptures and the holy books. That scribe asked Christ to follow Him everywhere. Having witnessed His authority over diseases, he aspired a high position in Christ's new kingdom, which the Jews thought He would establish on earth.

**V. 20:**

Christ responded that, unlike everybody else, He was poor and homeless and, whereas animals, like foxes, had dens, and birds had nests, He either slept in the boat or wherever He happened to be invited. At other times He would spend the entire night praying in seclusion. Christ's response exposes the scribe's true intent, namely, acquiring a material position, as opposed to love and seeking true discipleship with Christ.

*+ Ask yourself, as you seek fellowship with Christ: Is it because of your love for Him, or your quest for material acquisitions? Do you rebel whenever He delays His response, or whenever your prayers are not answered? Try to understand God's intent - since His entire purpose is your salvation and your fellowshiping with Him, even at the expense of some hardships, or lack of commodities.*

**V. 21:**

Another of Christ's followers, a disciple, though not one of the twelve, came forward declaring his persistence in following Christ, with no material intent - unlike the previously-discussed scribe. However, he asked Christ's permission to bury his father first. The intent here is not simply burying the body - rather, the entire lengthy process of the funeral rites, visitation and, likely, apportioning the inheritance. This process would also entail the heart's emotional attachment to sorrows, likely distracting it from the soul's salvation.

**V. 22:**

Christ told him to focus on following Him, rather than worldly preoccupations and customs.

*"The dead:"* This refers to those who are physically alive, yet spiritually dead - hence, non-believers, unconcerned about their salvation. They could be among the deceased's relatives and friends, preoccupied with the rites associated with burial and condolences. Therefore, that disciple's devotion to God would be impeded by his attachment to perishing, material, worldly issues. He should be dedicated to serving God, while leaving material preoccupations to the spiritually dead. We infer that Christ was not referring merely to burying a dead person; rather, impeding our fellowshiping with Him by excessive emotional attachments. It should be emphasized that natural emotions when burying a loved one, and loving those around us, are definitely not discouraged; quite the contrary, we should discharge our obligations towards parents and all loved ones out of our love of God, while maintaining our focus on our ultimate goal, namely, salvation of our souls.

**(V) Rebuking the winds (vs. 23 - 27)**

*"Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"*  
(Matthew 8:23 - 27)

**Vs. 23 & 24:**

Our Lord Christ slept on the boat, after having boarded it to cross Lake Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee) towards the eastern shore.

*"A great tempest:"* The Lake of Tiberias was significantly below sea level, and was surrounded by mountains. Consequently, sudden winds, stirring up high waves, were common.

*"Asleep:"*

In addition to confirming Christ's humanity and His need for rest and sleep, He slept deliberately in order to test His disciples' faith. Furthermore, He desired to accentuate their impotence, despite their experience in fishing and seamanship, thus stimulating their need for God the Saviour. The boat encountered strong winds and high waves, and was on the verge of sinking. The *winds* refer to trials, the *waves* symbolize our turbulent world, and the *boat* refers to our life indwelt by Christ - though, asleep, meaning inactive in our life, due to our lack of resorting to Him, and to our reliance on our own strength, whose impotence is revealed upon encountering Satan's cruel warfare.

**V. 25:**

Finally, having been convinced of their impotence, the disciples resorted to Christ. They declared that they were perishing due to their weakness before the violent storm, and asked Him to save them.

**V. 26:**

Prior to showing His authority over nature, Christ rebuked His disciples' weak faith. Having witnessed His miracles, their confidence and belief in His Divinity should have been sufficient to alleviate their fear of the waves. Christ subsequently rebuked the winds and waves, and the storm subsided.

*"Little faith:"*

The disciples did have faith - that is why they resorted to Christ. The extent of their faith, though, was insufficient. That was the reason for their fear, and their lack of confidence in His ability to save them.

*"He.....rebuked...:"*

This is a manifestation of Christ's Divinity and authority over nature – as though it were a person obeying instructions.

**"A great calm:"**

The winds and waves subsided immediately and fully, thus accentuating the miracle's power.

+ *When faced with hardships, or having fallen into sin, hasten to awaken Christ Who indwells you, through a humble and supplicatory prayer. He will save you and restore your peace.*

**V. 27:**

The disciples marveled at Christ's Divine power, and His authority over nature. Their faith subsequently grew, and their knowledge of Christ, the true God, increased.

**(VI) *The demon-possessed of the Gergesenes (vs. 28 - 34)***

***"When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two demon-possessed men, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way. And suddenly they cried out, saying, "What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?" Now a good way off from them there was a herd of many swine feeding. So the demons begged Him, saying, "If You cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of swine." And He said to them, "Go." So when they had come out, they went into the herd of swine. And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water. Then those who kept them fled; and they went away into the city and told everything, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they begged Him to depart from their region."*** (Matthew 28 - 34)

**V. 28:**

***"The other side:"*** The boat arrived with Christ to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

***"The country of the Gergesenes:"***

This was a village in the Gadarenes region, on the eastern shore of Lake Tiberias. Two demon-possessed, who had been living among that area's tombs, rushed towards Christ. It would seem that one of them was much more aggressive than the other, hence, his having been singled out by St. Mark and Luke (Mark 5:1 - 20 and Luke 8:26 - 39); they neglected to mention the other one. They were so agitated, that they obstructed the way of all passers-by, and people feared travelling on that road. Their mental faculties were totally impaired due to the demons indwelling them. They no longer had natural peace like other humans. Cruel demons have such an effect on complacent people, as they stray away from God. Even more so, the demons agitated them to the extent of obstructing the way of others. Satan will always attempt to hinder people's godly path.

**V. 29:**

Unable to tolerate seeing Christ, the demons cried out to Him not to torment them, conscious of their frailty and terror before His authority. The two men were possessed by a number of demons - not just one; that is why they spoke in the plural sense.

**"Before the time:"** This means "before judgment day."

**"Torment us:"** This means "to destroy us and cast us into eternal torment."

**Vs. 30 & 31:**

In Mark 5:13, we read that just outside the city limits there were plains where herds of swine, totaling about two thousand, were grazing. The swine asked Christ to allow them to possess the swine if He decided to exorcise them out of the two men. This demonstrates clearly Christ's authority over demons - they can make no move without His permission. This also shows the demons' evil intent, namely, to kill the swine, provoke their owners' anger against Christ, and hinder His preaching.

**V. 32:**

Christ permitted them to possess the swine, which then rushed to the sea and perished. This demonstrates the demons' cruelty, whose sole purpose is our perdition. Christ, though, did not permit them to destroy the men, rather, the swine. That was because swine were forbidden to the Jews, and raising them contravened Divine law. This also shows that the aggression exhibited by the two possessed men, was not due to a mental disorder, rather, due to the demons' action.

**"Steep place:"** This is the slope leading to the water's edge.

**Vs. 33 & 34:**

The power of Christ's miracle caused great consternation among the shepherds, and they mourned the loss of their wealth. They informed the town's locals who, in turn, went to see Christ. They feared His power and lamented the town's loss, namely, the swine. Their hardness of heart induced them to ignore the fact that the two possessed had been healed, because their adherence to material acquisitions blinded them. They failed to see the Divine grace and blessing which they could have acquired through Christ. Fearing other material losses, they asked Christ to leave their region.

Christ left them because of their clinging to material acquisitions. However, He dispatched the two men He had cured to evangelize in His name in the Decapolis (Mark 5:20) - meaning the surrounding areas.

*+ Materialism and the love of money will blind us to understanding God's work, and will lead us even to reject the action of His grace in us. We will thus lose the indwelling of Christ in our heart. For this reason we should always be empathetic towards those*

*around us, and seek to serve them. Sacrifice some of what you have - this will help open your eyes to perceive God's action.*

## Chapter 9

### Healing the sick - exorcising demons - raising Jairus' daughter

#### *(I) Healing the paralytic (vs. 1 - 8)*

*"So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, 'Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.' And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, 'This Man blasphemes!' But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"--then He said to the paralytic, 'Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.' And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men." (Matthew 9:1 - 8)*

#### **V. 1:**

After being rejected by the Gergesians, Christ boarded the boat to return to His city (Capernaum), which He had taken as His headquarters for teaching and performing miracles. By returning to His town, He demonstrates to us the importance of caring for our native land, while opening up our hearts for all. It seems that Christ had crossed Lake Tiberias, from west to east, expressly to cure the demon-possessed, whereupon He returned directly to Capernaum. This accentuates the importance, to Christ, of a single soul - hence, travelling for several hours, in order to encounter and save that soul.

#### **V. 2:**

Many attempts at healing that paralytic had failed. Having heard of Christ's arrival at Capernaum, the man's four friends hastened to bring him to Christ to cure him. The two evangelists Mark and Luke (Mark 2:3 - 12 and Luke 5:18 - 26) tell us that they had run into crowds around the house; thus, they went up to the roof, opened an aperture, and lowered the paralytic, on his bed, before Christ Who was seated among the multitude. Upon perceiving the faith of those friends, and the cause - sin - of that man's affliction, He granted him forgiveness through His Divine authority. That is the most significant grace - hence, healing the spirit before the body.

#### **V. 3:**

Seating around Christ were several scribes - the law's most knowledgeable, and the Jews' religious leaders. Nevertheless, rather than exercising their function as the people's servants, bringing them to Christ for healing and forgiveness of sins, they harboured wicked thoughts, reasoning in their hearts: "How can this Man blaspheme, given that,

while human, He speaks as God, having the authority to forgive."

**"Blaspheme:"** This means to speak impiously or irreverently of God – used here in the context of assuming authority which is solely God's. Christ knew their thoughts, without having to hear them - thus confirming His Divinity, since only God can know our thoughts. Christ rebuked them for their evil thoughts, which means that sinfulness is not confined to wicked speech or deeds; rather, it also encompasses harbouring wicked thoughts.

#### **Vs. 5 - 7:**

Christ questioned the scribes about which is easier: forgiving sins or curing the body?? They were too scared of Him to answer - since He knew their thoughts without their saying them. Of course it is easier to heal the body -but God, through His Divine authority, granted that which was more important, hence, forgiveness of sins. Further confirming His Divinity, Christ granted him the physical cure, saying: ***"Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house."***

*"Taking up the bed"* is a reflection of the healed man's strength. The bed is a reminder of the affliction - carrying it imparts the sensation of the miracle's power and, coincidentally, of his previous impotence, inducing him to thank God. *"The house"* refers to his earlier life, his return to the Church's fold, and his relationship with God, having been cured of his spiritual ailment

***"The Son of Man:"*** This is the incarnate Christ.

***"Power on earth:"*** This is the power of our heavenly God: He is omnipotent, He forgives sins and He cures the afflicted.

#### **V. 8:**

Having witnessed such an awesome miracle, the multitude marveled and glorified God, for having granted this great authority to a human being – Christ - since they had yet to believe on Christ's Divinity and incarnation.

*+ Praise every good deed you witness - neither consistently have a doubting mind, nor think negatively of everything. As humble as you may be, you are still capable of seeing others' virtues. Judge no one, and glorify God always.*

#### **(II) Christ calls Matthew (vs. 9 - 13)**

***"As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him. Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 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 9:9 - 13)

**V. 9:**

Matthew, this gospel's author, was a tax collector. That position was synonymous with cruelty, oppression, and the love of money. That was because the tax collector used to pay the Roman authorities, in advance, the taxes required from a certain region or village, then, with the help of Roman troops, collect much more from the people - regardless of the extent of their poverty. However, upon seeing Christ and hearing His teachings, he was deeply moved, and instantly obeyed Christ's calling. Submitting to Christ, he abandoned his work, wealth and sins - not even allowing himself to be deterred by consulting his relatives or loved ones.

Here, we see evidence of Christ's love and humility. Hence, He called His disciples from among the fishermen, or evil-doers, such as the tax collector who was known for cruelty and brutality, in order to cleanse and fill them with the Holy Spirit. Glory would be solely to Him, rather than to any human effort.

***"The tax office:"***

Likely, that was a large make-shift tent, guarded by Roman troops, and erected on the roadside for collecting money.

***"Follow Me:"***

Likely, he had heard of Christ before seeing Him, so that he was prepared to follow Him instantly upon being called.

**V. 10:**

***"Tax collectors and sinners:"***

Due to the tax collectors' greed and cruelty, their names were synonymous with sinners. The Jewish community rejected them. Having followed Christ, Matthew's heart rejoiced. He desired that his colleagues, the other tax collectors and sinners, also enjoy the knowledge of Christ. Thus, his spiritual wisdom led him to prepare a feast for Christ, where he invited all his friends, to hear and repent. Christ accepted Matthew's invitation, since he came to call sinners, not righteous, to repentance.

**V. 11:**

The Pharisees, though, adhered to spiritual appearances rather than essence; in their pride, they criticized others, and rebuked Christ's disciples, because their Teacher sat and ate with sinners. They were primarily fixated on appearances, without attempting to understand the underpinnings of the feast to which they had been invited, namely, Christ's preoccupation with saving souls.

**V. 12:**

***"Jesus heard that:"***

The Pharisees addressed themselves to the disciples, since they dared not speak to Christ. Christ, though, forcefully pointed out their error in refraining from calling sinners to repentance, under the guise of not defiling themselves by associating with sinners. Christ told them the reason for His incarnation: calling sinners to repentance - which is logical. A physician calls on the afflicted not the healthy - Christ came to call the stray to repentance.

**V. 13:**

Christ reproached them gently, urging their hearts to be merciful towards sinners - which is more important than offering sacrifices in ignorance, since an offering symbolizes Christ's mercy towards sinners by sacrificing His life on the Cross. This was proclaimed earlier by Hosea (Hosea 6:6).

***"Righteous:"***

This is in their own opinion, since there are no righteous humans - all have sinned and need Christ's redemption.

***"Sinners:"***

Those are the well-known sinners, such as the tax collectors.

*+ Seek the stray and call them to Christ. Pray for them. Find some means to attract them to God, either by speaking to them directly, or indirectly by speaking to others in their presence, or by saying words of encouragement, or by doing good deeds to influence their hearts. Your aim is to have them renounce their rejection of God.*

***(III) Understanding the concept of fasting (vs. 14 - 17)***

***"Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."*** (Matthew 9:14 - 17)

**V. 14:**

***"The disciples of John:"***

Some of John's disciples followed Christ and became His disciples. Some continued to cling to John's teaching of repentance and asceticism. Those who asked Christ were not His disciples.

**"Often:"**

The Pharisees had imposed additional fasts - not required by Mosaic law. Contrary to most of the Jews, Christ's disciples did not observe those fasts. The Pharisees and John's disciples criticized Christ, for His disciples' failure to fast. This implies that they felt those fasts were a heavy burden for them, from which they wanted to free themselves, or at least see others suffering likewise. Put differently, they had the appearance of fasting, without feeling its spiritual blessings.

**V. 15:**

**"Friends of the bridegroom:"** Those are the groom's close friends and relatives.

**"Mourn:"** This is because fasting is associated with supplications, tears and repentance. Christ responded that His disciples - who are the friends of the Groom, with Him as the Groom - should only fast after the Groom's departure; put differently, they would fast after Christ's ascension. However, during His life on earth, they enjoy His presence with them, and postpone their fasting, since it represents supplication and spiritual struggle. The disciples did indeed fast following Christ's ascension.

**V. 16:**

Our Lord Christ rectified the underlying problem, namely, the notion of fasting. It is not a compulsory rite - rather, it is love offered to God. Failing to change our lifestyle completely through repentance, will result in no benefit derived from any spiritual undertaking, because such an undertaking would be merely superficial - indeed it could be harmful, since it could foster pride. Christ likened that harm unto **"a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment,"** since the new threads will tear the old ones due to their greater strength. Thus, an old garment would not benefit from a new patch: the old garment would be torn.

**"An old garment:"** This refers to the Pharisees' lifestyle of pride and evil deeds, and their rejection of Christ.

**"A piece of unshrunk cloth:"** This refers to fasting which, if unincorporated into a renewed lifestyle within the Christian Faith, would be harmful, akin to fueling the Pharisees' pride. That was the disciples' second reason for not fasting, since the most important issue for them - and for everybody else - was belief on Christ and repentance, at which point, their worship and fasting would be acceptable.

**V. 17:**

**"Wineskin:"** This is a bag, made from an animal's skin, used for holding wine.

It should be noted that old wineskins are too weak to support the new wine's fermentation process - they would thus break, spilling the new wine. The thick skin of new wineskins is necessary to hold new wine.

**"Old wineskins:"** This means old containers, referring to the lives of the Pharisees, and John's disciples who had not yet believed on Christ.

**"New wine:"** This refers to fasting - spiritual worship which gladdens the heart.

**"New wineskins:"** This is the renewed life in Christ through faith; it is characterized by endurance, and all the adornments of spiritual practices, such as fasting.

+ *May your fasting be accompanied by repentance, partaking of the holy sacraments, reading the Bible and meditating on the word of God. In this way, your fast will become spiritual, stimulating your emotions with love and mercy towards the needy. You will thus rejoice, and yearn to fast, since it is a strong conduit to closeness to God - you will also liberate yourself from many cravings.*

**(IV) Healing the woman who had a flow of blood - raising Jairus' daughter (vs. 18 - 26)**

***"While He spoke these things to them, behold, a ruler came and worshiped Him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live." So Jesus arose and followed him, and so did His disciples. And suddenly, a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years came from behind and touched the hem of His garment. For she said to herself, "If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well." But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, "Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that hour. When Jesus came into the ruler's house, and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, He said to them, "Make room, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping." And they ridiculed Him. But when the crowd was put outside, He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. And the report of this went out into all that land."*** (Matthew 9:18 - 26)

**Vs. 18 & 19:**

There were many synagogues scattered throughout Judea, for holding religious rites and reading the holy scriptures - sacrifices were only offered in the temple in Jerusalem. The ruler of one of them, named Jairus, came to Christ (Mark 5:22 and Luke 8:41), in all faith and humility. His daughter had died; he worshipped Christ, and asked Him to raise her by touching her. He believed that she would then live. Great indeed is such faith; however, the Gentile centurion's faith was even greater, since he said to Christ, ***"only speak a word, and my servant will be healed."*** (Mathew 8:8) Put differently, Christ did not have to go to him - rather, a word from Him sufficed to heal the servant. According to Luke 8:42, Jairus' daughter was twelve years old. Those twelve years could be construed as a reference to the twelve tribes from whence the Jewish nation; also, having died in her bed could be a reference to sins of the innermost thoughts - Christ is capable of raising us up from such sins. As was His wont, Christ responded with much love; He proceeded to Jairus' home, and His disciples followed Him to witness His miracles and listen to His teaching.

**Vs. 20 - 22:**

The woman with the blood flow had been undergoing treatment for twelve years, to no avail. Here, again, assumed symbolism may point to the spiritually-afflicted soul - human means to cure sin are ineffective.

**"Came from behind:"** She could not face Christ - either for being too ashamed of her disease, or for fear of the Jews, since they considered a bleeding woman to be **"unclean"** (Leviticus 15:25 & 26), and would have prevented her from touching Christ. That woman sought to meet Christ on the road, as a soul encountering Christ amidst the world's turbulence, then having its ailments relieved after believing on Him. She believed that she would be cured simply by touching the hem of His garment - she did touch His garment and she was indeed healed. Extolling her faith, Christ praised her publicly, then confirmed that she had been completely cured.

**Vs. 23 & 24:**

Christ arrived at Jairus' house, and found all the relatives and loved ones weeping - even some hired musicians were straining their instruments to mournful tunes. Christ comforted everyone by telling them that she was only asleep - although she was really dead. However, through His Divine power, He would raise her up, since death, to Him, is mere slumber. Rather than believing Him, they ridiculed Him, since they were incapable of believing that He had the power to raise the dead.

**Vs. 25 & 26:**

Christ dismissed the non-believers; He took only those who believed in His power, namely, the girl's parents and some of His disciples (Mark 5:40). He held the girl's hand and raised her from the dead. Her parents and the multitude rejoiced and glorified God, Who raises from the dead. This is one among many clear pieces of evidence proving the Divinity of Christ - hence, at His command, death retreated, and the girl arose. The news spread throughout the regions surrounding Capernaum.

*+ Having faith, you will witness God's great feats. Do not be perturbed, when circumstances become complicated and solutions seem unachievable. Your God works unimaginable miracles, in each generation. All you need to do is rely on Him, confident of His love and shepherding.*

**(V) Healing the two blind men (vs. 27 - 31)**

**"When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you." And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned**

*them, saying, "See that no one knows it." But when they had departed, they spread the news about Him in all that country." (Matthew 9:27 - 31)*

**Vs. 27 & 28:**

On His way down the road, Christ was followed by two blind men; they cried out asking Him to cure them. They were analogous to the Jews and Gentiles who, having fallen into the gloom of sin, needed Christ the Savior to enlighten their lives. In order to test their faith, Christ left them *crying out* to Him all along the way. Upon arriving at His destination, He asked them, *"Do you believe that I am able to do this?"* They proclaimed to Him their belief that He was the *"Lord.....the Son of David,"* capable of healing them.

**Vs. 29 & 30:**

*"According to your faith:"*

God's bounties are infinite, and He is willing to grant you much, according to your faith. Christ *"touched their eyes,"* and their eyes were opened instantly.

*"Jesus sternly warned them:"*

Due to His humility, Christ forbade them to talk about His miracle. Christ also had other reasons: He had no need of men's praise, He did not wish to provoke the scribes' and Pharisees' jealousy, and He did not want them to assume that He was an earthly King, merely satisfying their material needs, thus leading up to their liberation from the Romans' yoke.

*+ Habituate yourself to refrain from discussing your deeds, seeking men's praise. Rather, follow Christ's example, and God, Who sees in secret, will reward you openly.*

**V. 31:**

Having witnessed Christ's love and humility, they returned His love in kind: they spread the news about this miracle, since they wanted everyone to believe on Christ. Obeying Christ, though, by not spreading the news, would have been better, since obedience is better than anything else.

*(VI) Healing the mute, demon-possessed (vs. 32 - 34)*

*"As they went out, behold, they brought to Him a man, mute and demon-possessed. And when the demon was cast out, the mute spoke. And the multitudes marveled, saying, "It was never seen like this in Israel!" But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons." (Matthew 32 - 34)*

**Vs. 32 & 33:**

Satan's possession of that man caused his physical handicap - he became mute. This is analogous to someone under the yoke of sin: Satan controls his mind, inducing his preoccupation with evil desires, and inhibiting his uttering God's word.

***"They brought to Him a man:"***

Being mute and demon-possessed, that man needed someone to guide him. When he was brought to Christ, Christ cast out the demon through His Divine authority. The demon was exorcized immediately, and the man returned to his normal self. The multitude rejoiced and glorified God, Who had sent them a Prophet to heal their afflictions, and liberate them from Satan's authority.

***"It was never seen like this:"***

This means that throughout Israel's history, there had never been a prophet who wrought such miracles, and who had authority over demons.

**V. 34:**

On the other hand, the Pharisees - the Jewish community leaders – believed neither on Christ's Divinity, nor on His authority over demons. Rather, their pride led them to see in Christ a competitor for Jewish leadership. Thus, they accused Christ of being empowered to exorcize demons through His association with ***"the ruler of the demons."***

+ *Pride hinders clear understanding, inhibiting you from appreciating God's work with you and in you. Be humble, accept others' advice, seek God's guidance daily, and submit to your confessor's advice.*

***(VII) Preaching in the cities and villages (vs. 35 - 38)***

***"Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."***

(Matthew 9:35 - 38)

**V. 35:**

Christ took care to reach out to both cities and villages - meaning the rich and poor. In order to accentuate the importance of reaching out, He focused neither on Capernaum, Jerusalem, nor any other large city. He preached preparedness, through repentance, for the approaching kingdom of heaven. He averred His words through miracles, to induce belief on His evangelism.

**V. 36:**

This demonstrates Christ's tender heart over His children - those whose Pharisee leaders had failed to attract towards repentance - caring, personally, for their shepherding.

*"Weary:"*

This is the perturbation accompanying sinfulness and straying away from God.

*"Scattered:"*

They were susceptible to Satan's attacks and falling into sin.

**Vs. 37 & 38:**

Our Lord Christ drew His disciples' attention to the needs of the souls that He was shepherding, likening them unto the fields' wheat awaiting harvesting. The labourers, though (leaders of the Jewish community) being fixated on their own honor, failed to offer any service. Christ did not tell His disciples to harvest, rather, to ask God to send servants to shepherd His congregation. This is because Christ wanted them to understand that service is a Divine calling, rather than merely being the result of one's conviction or reaction. Put differently, Christ wanted them to pray, which would result in God moving their emotions to care for souls and, from thence, God would dispatch them to serve.

*+ May you be preoccupied with the salvation of the souls of those around you - you would then have pity on them, rather than be irritated by their numerous faults. In your prayers may you ask God to move their hearts? They are all His children created after His image. He desires their salvation. Consequently, either God will send you to them, or He will send someone to lead them back to Him.*

## Chapter 10

### Calling the disciples - the disciples' evangelism in Judea

*(I) Calling the twelve (vs. 1 - 4)*

*"And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease. Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him."* (Matthew 10:1 -4)

#### V. 1:

Christ chose twelve, from among His followers, to become His disciples. This calling was done in several stages. Christ's goal was to disciple them, so that they may receive from Him the spiritual life and teachings with which they would evangelize the world. As they went forth preaching repentance and the kingdom of heaven, He supported them by granting them the authority to exorcize demons and heal diseases, thus promoting people's faith in believing on what they were preaching. This, in turn, would distance the controlling Satan, and relieve them of their burdens, ultimately rendering their hearts more receptive to the gospel.

+ *Offer your love to others - this would open up their hearts and make them more amenable to accept your words.*

#### V. 2:

There were twelve disciples - hence, three times four. This refers to the work of the Holy Trinity throughout the four corners of the world, plus evangelizing the twelve tribes of Israel.

*"Simon, who is called Peter:"* He was the "rock" or "Cephas; and was the first and eldest disciple.

*"Andrew:"* He was Simon Peter's brother - both used to be John the Baptist's disciples.

*"James the son of Zebedee:"* He was the first disciple to be martyred.

*"John:"* He was James' brother. Both were hot-tempered, so Christ labeled them "Boanerges" or "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). John was characterized by his great love for Christ, and he used to lean against His chest.

*"Philip:"* He hailed from Bethsaida (John 1:44) - he is not Philip, one of the seven deacons mentioned in the Acts. He, in turn, called Bartholomew, also known as Nathanael, who hailed from Cana of Galilee.

*"Thomas:"* He is also known as "the twin."

*"Matthew:"* He is also called Levi. He humbly referred to himself as "the tax collector,"

since tax collectors were known for being sinful.

**"James the son of Alphaeus:"** He is also known as "James the less" (Mark 15:40), distinguishing him from the older James the son of Zebedee. He was Christ's relative and eventually became Bishop of Jerusalem.

**"Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus:"** Luke calls him "Judas the son of James" (Luke 6:16).

#### **V. 4:**

**"Simon the Cananite:"** His name also means "Simon the Zealot" (Luke 6:15). He did not hail from Cana of Galilee. The Zealots were a group of nationalist Jews who had banded together to resist, including vandalism, the Roman occupation of their homeland.

**"Judas Iscariot:"** He sold Christ, and delivered Him, to the Jews. It is widely believed that "Iscariot" comes from the Hebrew "Ishq'riyoth" meaning "man of Kerioth" - a city in Palestine. It should be noted that Christ chose His disciples from among everyday laymen - none of whom had a distinguished position in society - in order for their deeds to be attributed to the power of God acting through them, rather than to any personal prowess. Christ is prepared to accept, and to work through, any person, regardless of the extent of their weakness.

Furthermore, Christ chose them with a variety of backgrounds. Hence, we have Matthew, a tax collector subservient to the Roman authorities, Simon the Zealot, who challenged the Roman authorities, the poor such as Peter and Andrew, and the rich such as James and John the sons of Zebedee. Christ gathers all, through a single love theme, in His Church.

+ *God is ready to work through the lowliest and weakest of persons. Therefore, adhere to your spiritual relationship with God, regardless of your weakness when your sins confront you, and regardless of your abilities. God is capable of working through you, so that you may serve Him, and so that you may glorify Him by thanking Him at all times.*

#### **(II) The disciples' evangelism (vs. 5 - 15)**

***"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. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food. Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out. And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. 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. 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!"* (Matthew 10:5 - 15)

**Vs. 5 & 6:**

Christ dispatched them to evangelize in Judea - but not in Samaria, which was the seceded part of the Jewish nation, and which had mingled with the Gentiles and their idolatry. He also forbade them to go to the Gentiles, hence, the pagan nations, since Christ was the Messiah anticipated by the Jews, Who would come to save them, so that all who awaited the prophetic and Divine promises might believe on Him. Subsequently, evangelism would fan out to the Gentiles, since Christ came for the salvation of the whole world. The Jews, though, would come first, since they were supposed to be the first to respond positively to His message: first, He would gather the Jews who had strayed away from the truth, followed by the Samaritans who represented the link between Jews and Gentiles, then the Gentiles. In the end, salvation is offered to the entire world - which is precisely what happened after Christ's ascension (Matthew 28:19).

**V. 7:**

The essence of the disciples' evangelism is identical to John the Baptist's and Christ's Himself, namely, repentance in preparation for the kingdom of heaven; by repenting, we reject our sins, and start a renewed life with Christ. Christ will thus reign over our hearts, as a deposit for our enjoyment of the eternal kingdom in His company.

**V. 8:**

Christ gave His disciples everything they needed for evangelizing. Hence, He gave them the authority to cure afflictions, to heal all uncleanness, to raise the dead, and to exorcise demons from the fainthearted. Put differently, He gave them authority over everything, even over whatever seemed impossible, in order to deliver His children from Satan's grip, and ready them for accepting the Faith. The prerequisite was that their service be offered free of charge - as love with no expected return - exactly as He had given them everything free of charge. This would enable them to attract people's hearts. This principle continues to be applied in today's service, namely, servants offer their spiritual service free of charge.

**Vs. 9 & 10:**

*"Neither gold nor silver nor copper:"*

In that era, currency was minted in those three metals. The intent here is neither money, nor anything having any value, made from those metals. Since Christ's power supported them, they did not need to carry any money or food in their money belts or bags. Furthermore, they were in no need of spare clothing, spare sandals or spare staffs, since Christ would support them, and their necessities would be supplied by those to whom they

preach. Although service is free, God will provide His servants' necessities through donations by those whom they serve. The intent here is that it sufficed each disciple to take his necessities without any spare extras, since God would provide whatever they lacked.

**V. 11:**

Our Lord Christ instructed His disciples to find, wherever they went, the household most receptive to their preaching, hence, the most deserving of the disciples' message; response would be repentance and lifestyle change. He also told them to reside in that receptive house, and to continue their evangelism until their hosts' complete conversion. Thus, they should not hasten to move from one house to another - rather, focus and fulfill their mission for each person. On the other hand, they should not be preoccupied with, or seek, hospitality in different homes - their mission was solely evangelism. Any place in which they choose to reside should be considered merely a shelter, and springboard for serving souls.

**Vs. 12 & 13:**

*"Greet it:"*

Offer the household sufficient salutations, love and care. Evangelism must not be dry - rather, it should be accompanied with love. It is thus clear that expressing sincere emotions is paramount for attracting others. Christ commanded them to preach His peace to all hearts and to offer their love indiscriminately. Those who respond positively will enjoy Christ's salvation, and benefit from the peace offered to them. On the other hand, the disciples should not lament rejection - their peace and love will return to them, and those who rejected will suffer the loss of the grace of God.

**V. 14:**

*"Shake off the dust from your feet:"*

Shaking off the dust was a well-known custom symbolizing absolvmentfrom any responsibility - meaning that the disciples had discharged their obligations, and those who had rejected the word of God would be held accountable. This could also symbolize the disciples' rejection of any material offerings from them - even including the dust on their feet.

**V. 15:**

*"The Day of Judgment:"*

On that day, those who had rejected Christ's message, preached through the apostles, will lose their chance of redemption and attaining the kingdom. They will be cast into eternal torment, even greater than that in store for those of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose wickedness (in the Old Testament – see Genesis 19:24) was so great, that God burned down their cities for theirrejection of godliness. In the New Testament, they rejected

Christ Himself.

+ *On a daily basis, be mindful of the importance of expressing your love to those around you, and to all whom you serve, trying to attract them to Christ. Expressing love through words and deeds is a necessary prelude for the hearts' receptiveness to obeying the word of God: hence, by seeing God in you, they accept God's word through your lips.*

**(III) The world's persecution of the disciples (vs. 16 - 23)**

***"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes."*** (Matthew 10:16 - 23)

**V. 16:**

A single wolf terrifies an entire flock of sheep, although it could only devour a few; the presence of several wolves would create unimaginable terror! However, God's power is manifested through weak sheep not only vanquishing a pack of wolves, but also transforming their nature from savage to docile. Furthermore, St. John Chrysostom said, *"He bids them have not only gentleness as sheep, but also the harmlessness of the dove. For thus shall I best show forth my might, when sheep....being in the midst of wolves, and receiving a thousand bites.....do even.....a thing far greater and more marvelous than killing them, to alter their spirit, and to reform their mind....."* That was precisely what transpired throughout the apostles' evangelization: in the process of enduring brutal persecutions, they transformed many cruel hearts. Martyrs also attracted many of their torturers to the Faith. Christ also called on His disciples to espouse the gentleness and innocence of doves, since the latter are known for being inoffensive. At the same time, they should be as wise as serpents, since serpents always shy away from any danger. Let us, therefore, stay clear of all evil and lead a godly lifestyle.

**Vs. 17 & 18:**

***"Beware:"*** Be vigilant when evangelizing the wicked and cast not yourselves needlessly at their mercy; however, if this is necessitated by preaching, be fearless.

***"Councils:"***

Reference here is either to the minor councils, found in each village, where local Jewish elders sentenced culprits, or to the Sanhedrin, the supreme council in Jerusalem (Chapter 5:21 & 22).

***"Their synagogues:"***

They abounded throughout Judea. In synagogues, the holy books were read and sermons were delivered. A synagogue also incorporated three elders, who served as judges, and who were empowered to sentence offenders to scourging.

***"...and scourge you... :"***

Offenders were sentenced to forty lashes. As a precautionary measure against possible errors, the Jews specified thirty-nine, since the strap consisted of three branches, and the culprit was lashed thirteen times - hence, a total of thirty-nine.

***"Governors and kings:"***

Examples include Felix the governor (Acts 24) and Agrippa the king (Acts 26), both of whom judged Paul.

***"A testimony to them:"***

This is for the purpose of converting them, as Paul tried with king Agrippa (Acts 26).

***"...and to the Gentiles:"***

This refers to all the multitudes who would be present at their trials. Many believed during the martyrs' trials and tortures. In this segment, Christ elaborates the persecutions awaiting the apostles, or God's children, across the generations. Instead of their being honored and recognized for their evangelism, they would be arrested, tried, tortured and scourged. Servants' faith and steadfastness in Christ is thus evinced.

**Vs. 19 & 20:**

Christ comforts us saying that, during such encounters, the Holy Spirit would give us what we need to say in order to either convince or rebut them, since the power of the Holy Spirit indwelling us surpasses all human wisdom.

***"The Spirit of your Father:"***

This demonstrates the Father's care and gentleness - since His Holy Spirit supports the apostles and servants throughout all generations.

**V. 21:**

Persecutions will arise, from our enemies, and from those closest to us, such as parents and siblings. It is very strange indeed that religious fanaticism can mushroom to the extent that natural love among loved ones is eradicated. This has materialized and continues to be seen today.

**V. 22:**

**"All:"**

This refers to most unbelievers.

**"For My name's sake:"**

For the sake of your adherence to the Faith and to evangelism.

**"He who endures:"**

Persecution does not only mean putting people to death, but also it will most likely include humiliation, torture, and stripping of rights. All those hardships require patience on the part of servants and believers alike.

**"The end:"**

This means either the end of persecution or the end of life. In extreme hardships, a person may find himself hated and persecuted, for Christ's sake, by all around him. God will permit this as a testimonial to our Faith. Patience and endurance, plus confidence in the Holy Spirit's support, will help us traverse such hardships, and earn us not only salvation for our souls, but also an utterable eternal reward. Our Lord Christ also instructed His disciples to avoid confrontations with evil doers who reject the Faith - rather, they should flee to other lands and resume their preaching. Such evasion, should not be construed as weakness, rather, preoccupation with evangelism; the proof is that they joyfully accepted martyrdom for Christ's sake. With the exception of John, all the disciples were martyred. John, though, endured much suffering, was banished, and passed away in exile. Christ foretold that their evangelism would be completed only after His coming and reigning in people's hearts through their belief on Him. Put differently, evangelism would spread throughout the entire world. The temple's destruction in 70 A.D. signaled the demise of Jewish worship, and Christianity propagation as the "new Israel."

*+ Adhere to your principle of selfless love, as a lamb ready for its slaughter. Be as simple and harmless as a dove. Offer this love wisely, at the right time, and through the most appropriate means. In this way Christ will be evident to all who meet you. Be confident that the Divine power indwelling you is stronger than the world and its wickedness. Love vanquishes hate, and simplicity defeats wiliness. God, Who resides within you, protects and guides you, as you proceed towards cruel hearts, softening them, and returning them to God.*

**(IV) Boldness (vs. 24 - 33)**

***"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household! Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. 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. Are not twosparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10:24 - 33)*

**Vs. 24 & 25:**

***"A disciple is not above his teacher:"***

Christ's disciples are not better than Christ. Since Christ endured humiliation and crucifixion, the natural corollary is His disciples' sharing His suffering, by enduring persecutions.

***"Nor a servant above his master:"***

It would seem that such expressions were commonplace in those days. Christ used them to clarify His intent. The "*servant*" refers to believers, and the "*Master*" is our Lord Christ.

***"Beelzebub:"***

This is the name given to the god of the Philistine city of Ekron (2 Kings 1:1 - 18).

***"His household:"***

Those are Christ's children, hence, His disciples, believers, and members of His Church - His house. Christ reminds His disciples that the world would persecute Him, and that He would be accused of being the demons' leader. Consequently, being His disciples, the world would persecute them as well. Bearing the cross is proof of being His followers.

**Vs. 26 & 27:**

***"Covered....revealed:"***

These refer to everything the disciples learned from Christ during their residence with Him, as well as to the teachings addressed solely to the Jews.

***"Be known:"***

It will be revealed and disseminated to all nations.

***"The dark:"***

Those are the quiet or dimly-lit places. Alternatively, this could refer to Christ's private sessions with His disciples.

***"The light:"***

It means clear manifestation and evangelism for all to witness.

***"The ear:"***

This is what Christ told His disciples privately.

***"The housetops:"***

This refers to teaching and preaching from pulpits, or in high places, so that everyone may hear. Christ alerts them to be fearless when faced with accusations, since their service and love of righteousness would be revealed publicly, in time, and their

evangelism will reach the ends of the earth. That was the first reason offered for facing enemies boldly. Furthermore, Christ encouraged them to evangelize everywhere forcefully and bravely, and to proclaim openly what they had learnt from Him privately. In this fashion, evangelism will spread and people will believe.

**V. 28:**

Our Lord Christ offers a second reason for not fearing people, namely, the utmost human authority is limited to harming the body - but no human authority can ever harm the spirit. On the other hand, we should fear God, Who has authority over both body and spirit. If we feared God, we would have no fear of men.

**Vs. 29 - 31:**

**"A copper coin:"**

That was the smallest denomination of Jewish currency. Through this example, Christ offers the third reason for not fearing men, namely, God's care not only for us humans, but also for all His creation. Hence, God provides the needs even of the sparrow, the smallest of all birds and which is sold for half a copper coin, and which will only die with God's permission. How much more, then, will God care for humans, the crown of His creation? God cares so much for humans that even the hairs on our head are counted, and a single one will not fall without His permission.

*+ Place your full reliance on God and do not impede your service. Be confident of His protection and His management of your life. You are His responsibility - and His support for you scares Satan away.*

**Vs. 32 & 33:**

**"Confesses Me:"**

This means "whoever acknowledges My name in speech and deeds, adhering to the commandments, and rejecting sin through repentance."

**"My Father Who is in heaven:"**

Our admission into the Divine Justice, that is the Father, is through the mercy of the Son, Who will envelop us with His mercy, intercede on our behalf through His blood, and bring us into the heavenly glories. The fourth reason for fearlessness is the heavenly reward. Whoever is steadfast in his faith, evangelizing Christ's name, and confessing Him publicly, will attain a heavenly place. Conversely, God will reject in heaven, whoever rejects Christ, distancing himself from Him, on earth.

**(V) Bearing the cross (vs. 34 - 39)**

***'Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not***

*worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."* (Matthew 10:34 - 39)

**Vs. 34 - 36:**

*"A sword:"*

This refers to the struggle between good and evil, or Christians' persecution by non-believers. External peace thus vanishes. However, God grants them His internal peace throughout those persecutions.

*"Daughter-in-law:"*

This is the son's wife. Christ foretells the suffering to be endured for steadfastness in our faith. This is the cross to be borne for His sake. He labelled it *"a sword"* due to problems emerging within families: a father turning against his converted son, and a non-believing mother turning against her Christian daughter. A Christian will thus encounter enemies from his own household - but he must endure all those sufferings for Christ's sake.

**V. 37:**

Sentiments prevailing among family members are naturally strong. However, our love for Christ should transcend any other sentiment. Therefore, if ever there is a conflict between trusting our loved ones versus our faith in Christ, we should definitely obey God - otherwise we would not deserve Him as our God, and we should have no place with Him in heaven. Thus, God must be obeyed more than men.

**V. 38:**

Whoever desires to follow Christ, must endure suffering for His sake, and give up much to prove his love for Him

**V. 39"**

*"Finds his life:"*

This refers to preoccupation with, and deriving pleasure from, worldly lusts.

*"Will lose it:"*

This means straying away from God, leading to loss of a place in heaven, and ending up in eternal perdition.

*"He who loses his life:"*

This is the person who dedicates his entire life to worship and service.

*"Will find it:"*

This person will acquire peace, comfort and fellowship with God on earth - followed by his eternal reward in heaven. Christ requires us to give up our personal comfort and desires for His sake; whoever complies will find true solace in Him, and will receive perfect comfort in eternity.

+ *Consider what you have given up for Christ's sake to prove your love for Him. Adhere*

*to His commandments - even at the expense of materially losing what others enjoy. Presence with Christ transcends evil lusts, laziness, or comfort.*

**(VI) Honoring others (vs. 40 - 42)**

***"He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him Who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."*** (Mathew 10:40 - 42)

**Vs. 40 & 41:**

***"Him Who sent Me:"***

This is God. Accepting Christ's aphorisms on earth is tantamount to accepting God - Who was known to the Jews.

***"In the name of a prophet:"***

This refers to a person endowed with the gift of prophesying, regardless of any other attributes as a human being. Analogously, a priest is honored for the office he occupies, rather than for any personal traits.

***"A prophet's reward:"***

This refers to God's blessing to a prophet or to whoever honors a prophet.

***"Righteous:"***

This is a believer leading a spiritual, godly, lifestyle. Christ proclaims His disciples' honor, to encourage them when faced with persecutions. Honoring them is honoring Him - personally. Accepting their teaching means accepting Him. Therefore, a Divine reward awaits all who accept them.

**V. 42:**

***"These little ones:"***

Those are the servants who endure much suffering in serving Him and evangelizing.

***"A cup of cold water:"***

A small refreshing drink goes a long way in helping a servant persevere in his service.

***"In the name of a disciple:"***

This could be either a disciple or a follower of Christ.

***"He shall by no means lose his reward:"***

This means he has a heavenly reward. Christ accentuates the importance of the smallest service offered to God's servants. Given that servants, priests or bishops offer spiritual shepherding to their congregations, it is incumbent on the congregations to show their love for God through those servants. In turn, this could be achieved by offering them help or satisfying their needs, by way of manifesting their love of God, Who,

humbly, offers Himself through those servants. Consequently, whoever offers a glass of water to one of those servants, being Christ's disciple, will most certainly receive a Divine reward in heaven, and even during life on earth.

+ *Do not belittle the love you offer God by gladdening those around you - however slight that effort might be. This could include words of encouragement, material help, or psychological support. All those are very precious in God's view, and He will reward you for them. Do not neglect an opportunity to serve. Find out what you can give, especially to those closest to you.*

# Chapter 11

## Discussion about John the Baptist - Rejecting the Faith

*(I) John dispatches two disciples to Christ (vs. 1 - 6)*

*"Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities. And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." (Matthew 11:1 - 6)*

### **V. 1:**

After having clarified to His disciples evangelism's *"modus operandi,"* Christ proceeded to demonstrate to them a practical example, by starting to teach, what He had just taught them, in the synagogues which abounded in Galilee.  
+ *In order to ensure the effectiveness of what you teach you must be extra careful to apply it.*

### **Vs. 2 & 3:**

King Herod arrested and imprisoned John. Feeling his end of life approaching, John wanted to attach his disciples to Christ. He therefore sent two of them to Christ asking: *"Are You the awaited Messiah or not?"* John himself had no doubts - he was certain that that was the awaited Messiah, since not only had he worshipped Him while still in his mother's womb, but also after baptizing Him, he had testified saying, *"Behold! The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29) That meant He was indeed the redeeming Christ. John merely wanted to edify those two disciples' faith in Christ, so that they may tell John's other disciples - then all would become Christ's disciples.

### **Vs. 4 & 5:**

*"The poor"* - In addition to the poor and weak, this group more aptly includes the poor in spirit, meaning the humble.

Christ's response to those two disciples was in reference to the various miracles which they had witnessed. Those miracles included curing diseases of varying degrees of severity - even leprosy which symbolized uncleanness,

or afflictions which resulted in death. Christ was able to deliver man from all of them. Consequently, they should deduce that He was indeed the Messiah.  
+ *Let your good deeds be an example witnessing for your Christ, especially when it is difficult to talk about Christ - since actions speak louder than words, and words without deeds are insufficient.*

#### **V. 6:**

Here, Christ alerts the two disciples against being offended or doubting Him, since some of John's followers were quite zealous about their teacher and, behold, a better Teacher emerged, and everyone followed Him (John 3:26). Christ was thus calling them to believe on Him, since He was the Messiah for Whom John had paved the way.

#### **(II) Christ's testimony concerning John (vs. 7 - 15)**

*"As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 11:7 - 15)*

#### **V. 7:**

The "*reed*" mentioned by Christ refers to hollow reeds which abounded by the River Jordan where John was baptizing. After the departure of John's disciples, Christ testified, praising John who had prepared the way for Him. Christ's testimony, which in no way harboured any flattery, used "*a reed shaken by the wind*" as an example: a hollow reed refers to a person devoid of the grace of God - and the wind refers to the world's evil thoughts. A person who has an outward shiny appearance, like a reed, while having no in-depth relationship with God, is easily swayed by the winds of temptations and evil thoughts. John, though, was quite unlike this portrayal. He was satiated with God, paving the path for Christ, by calling everyone to repentance; he was steadfast in his principles regardless of surrounding evil circumstances.

**V. 8:**

Christ questioned the crowd whether John was clothed in soft garments; he was not, since those attired in soft clothing luxuriate in palaces in cities. Soft garments refer to a pampered body, reveling in pleasures and comfort. John, on the other hand, led an ascetic, austere, life in the wilderness. He wore rough clothing and he ate the bare minimum, since his heart was preoccupied with serving God. For this reason, Christ proclaimed John's greatness, his steadfastness in the Faith, and the fact that he had not sent two disciples for his own benefit, rather, to have them follow Christ.

**Vs. 9 & 10:**

John the Baptist was greater than any of the Old Testament prophets - because they yearned to see Christ, but they never did; they only prophesied His advent. On the other hand, John not only prophesied Christ's advent, but he also saw Him - and even baptized Him. John was the messenger who prepared the way for Christ (Malachi 3:1).

**V. 11:**

John is the greatest among humans. Christ was greater than John, although He was six months younger. There is another viewpoint: namely, John was the greatest among the Old Testament men - but the least New Testament believer is greater, from the aspect of partaking of the holy sacraments in church, plus all the New Testament's blessings.

**V. 12:**

Christ accentuated the significance of the spiritual struggle aiming to attain the kingdom of heaven. This struggle must be proportional to the New Testament's grace offered by John the Baptist, in order to maintain adherence to it. It is even necessary to subjugate our body, abandoning our sins, clinging to our prayers and relationship with God, and seizing every spiritual opportunity to be closer to God and to enjoy fellowship with Him.

**Vs. 13 - 15:**

*"Until John"* - this is because he was the final Old Testament prophet.

*"And if you are willing to receive it"* - this means: *"If you had faith, you would believe what I am about to say."*

All the prophets' aim was preparing for the advent of Christ. John, the forerunner, paved the way for Christ directly. He came in Elijah's spirit, thus fulfilling the promise that Elijah would come, but in a spiritual, rather than a physical, form - which is what will happen on the last days (Malachi 4:5 & 6). As he had ascended in the flesh, Elijah will return in the flesh, to proclaim

the voice of God before the final Judgment Day.

Due to the importance of this teaching, Christ said, "*Whoever has inner ears in his heart to hear and believe - then let it be so.*" That was because many of them were doubters, who disbelieved that John had indeed come in Elijah's spirit to prepare the way for the awaited Messiah. Believing this fact, would lead to their belief that Christ was the awaited Messiah. He was therefore urging them to listen carefully, understand, and believe.

*+ Strongly proclaiming the truth while adhering to God's commandments necessitates full dedication, following the example set by John the Baptist. Do not pamper yourself with physical pleasures and luxuries - then you will possess a strong will in your spiritual struggle, worship, service, and proclaiming the name of Christ.*

### **(III) Rejecting the Faith (Vs. 16 - 19)**

*"But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, and saying: 'We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not lament.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children."* (Matthew 11:16 - 19)

#### **Vs. 16 & 17:**

*"This generation"* refers to the scribes, Pharisees and chief priests who had rejected Christ.

*"Children"* - means those who are disadvantaged in their understanding and absorption of spiritual meanings and the words of God, and uncertain about their viewpoints.

*"Marketplaces"* - those were the places where children gathered to play. Our Lord Christ likens the Jewish leaders, hence the scribes, Pharisees and others, who had rejected John the Baptist's calling, and rejected belief on Christ, unto two groups of children playing in the marketplace: one group laughing and playing music, while the other remains mournful and unaffected by the joyful music. This metaphor portrays John the Baptist, who came preaching repentance and grief for one's sins, versus Christ Who came preaching love while healing the sick to gladden hearts. The Jewish leaders rejected both.

#### **Vs. 18 & 19:**

*"Neither eating nor drinking"* - this portrays asceticism and contentment with the least amount of food.

**"He has a demon"** - people attached this label to him, believing he communicated with demons, due to his isolation in the wilderness and his unconventional lifestyle.

**"A glutton and a winebibber"** - that was an exaggerated accusation levelled against Christ by the Jewish elders - although He ate and drank like everybody else. John the Baptist led a hermit's life in the wilderness. Instead of learning asceticism from him, they accused him of being possessed by a demon. On the other hand, Jesus Christ led a normal life among people, eating and drinking like them, to demonstrate commandments' fulfillment in everyday life. However, Christ was falsely accused of being preoccupied with consuming food and too much wine; He was also accused of favoring the company of publicans and sinners, because He ate and drank with them - whereas, in fact, He frequented them in order to attract them to repentance, as He did with Matthew and Zacchaeus, the tax collectors.

Jewish leaders were like children - hence, spiritually immature. On the other hand, Christ's disciples and followers were spiritually mature.

**"But wisdom is justified by her children"** - This refers to those who believed John's calling and Christ's preaching. Wisdom's righteousness is reflected in its followers, in other words, followers of John the Baptist, then Christ the eternal wisdom, and believed on Him. Hence, wisdom's power and righteousness are manifested in those who believe in it, namely, disciples and believers.

+ *Do not hasten in judging others lest you should err. Do not be biased, lest people's virtues should become sins in your view. Quite the contrary, search for God in others' virtues, in order to learn and be disciplined at their hands - you will thus love everyone, and grow in a godly lifestyle.*

#### **(IV) Punishment for those who reject the Faith**

***"Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."*** (Matthew 11:20 - 24)

**Vs. 20 & 21:**

Having explained the Faith to His audience, and having substantiated His calling with miracles, Christ rebuked them for hardening their hearts and rejecting the Faith. His rebuke was aimed especially at the cities in the region of Galilee, due to their having seen many of His miracles. Christ declared that horrible eternal torment awaited the cities of Chorazin (a Galilean city adjacent to Bethsaida and Capernaum) and Bethsaida (a city on Lake Tiberias). That is because His miracles and clear teachings should have been conducive to their adopting the Faith. Had those miracles and teachings been available to the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon (currently in Lebanon by the Mediterranean Sea), they would have repented, manifesting their remorse and supplication in sackcloth and ashes. This demonstrates the extent of hardness of the Chorazin and Bethsaida inhabitants' hearts, which had led them to reject belief on Christ.

**V. 22:**

On Judgment Day, Tyre and Sidon will endure a more tolerable punishment than Chorazin and Bethsaida, because the latter rejected a great Faith presented by Christ Himself. This verse implies that there are degrees of eternal torment. Those who had rejected Christ, and life with Him, will be subjected to a more severe punishment than that awaiting those who never knew Christ, leading a pagan, sinful, and lifestyle.

*+ Each person will be judged in proportion to the Divine grace awarded him. For this reason, our lifestyle must reflect what we heard in church and at home. Those teachings support our march on the path of salvation, rather than being used for our condemnation.*

**V. 23:**

Our Lord Christ speaks of Capernaum, which had become His evangelism's headquarters in Galilee. Consequently, He wrought many miracles there, which should have saved it and secured its position in heaven. Unfortunately, its inhabitants were boastful, and considered themselves better than others around them - as though they were in heaven, while others were on earth and deserved to be despised. Since that city rejected Christ, it was destined to descend into hades. Had the Divine grace awarded to Capernaum been available to ancient Sodom, it would have repented and would have been spared the Divine sentencing of burning.

**V. 24:**

Our Lord subsequently confirms that Sodom's punishment on the Day of Judgment,

will be less than that of Capernaum's which had rejected Him - though, both will perish. Capernaum will incur a more severe punishment for having rejected Christ. Likewise, all who reject Christianity today, will incur a more severe punishment.

***(V) The humbles' blessings***

***"At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. 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. Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.""*** (Matthew 11:25 - 30)

**Vs. 25 & 26:**

***"At that time"*** - This means "After His discussion about the boastfulness of those cities that rejected Him, after having preached to them, and the severe punishment awaiting them."

***"I thank You"*** - This is like any human being, thanking God for His wisdom and economy.

***"The wise and prudent"*** - Those were the scribes and Pharisees who were wise in their own eyes, and were boastful of their own knowledge.

***"Babes"*** - Those were the disciples whose knowledge had not matured, but were humble and obedient to His words.

***"Even so"*** - This confirms the previous answer, namely, Divine grace is granted to the humble.

***"It seemed good in Your sight"*** - God rejoices in granting His grace to the humble. In this great discussion between the Son and Father, Christ confesses and proclaims an important fact: the knowledge of God is granted to the simple and humble. The wise in their own eyes - meaning the proud - are deprived from it; God does not give His glory to someone else.

**V. 27:**

***"All things have been delivered to Me by My Father"*** - This means that the Son has full authority to redeem and save humanity. This does not mean that He had acquired this authority only after His incarnation; rather, it is a proclamation to us, humans, that the Son has all the authority of the Father. Since the Jews knew God in the Old Testament, Christ, Who appeared in

the New Testament, is making Himself known to them - that He is God, having full authority, since he is consubstantial with the Father.

**"No one knows the Son"** - This means the entire humanity, regardless of their belief, will never know the essence of God - because they are all limited, having a limited capacity for knowledge. Only God the Father is capable of knowing the Son, because They are equal in essence.

**"Nor does anyone know the Father"** - All Old Testament believers in God can never know God the Father fully - the only One Who knows the Father is the Son, since They are equal in essence.

**"And the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him"** - Those are the saints, to whom Christ reveals through His Holy Spirit, a greater - but not full - knowledge of God, more so than other humans, due to their humility and their yearning to love God. No one knows God except His own Essence, because He transcends human cognizance. The Son knows the Father, and the Father knows the Son – put differently, only God knows Himself. But God, due to His love, revealed Himself to us through the Son's incarnation; the Son makes God known to us to the extent of our humility. The humble are the chosen who enjoy the knowledge of God.

#### **V. 28:**

**"Come to Me"** - This is an invitation to all humans who feel burdened and who feel the need for salvation. However, those fully immersed in the world's pleasures, satisfied with its lusts, do not feel the need for Christ.

**"All you who labor and are heavy laden"** - This refers to sin's heaviness, the conscience's rebuke, the problems arising from sinful lifestyles, plus all the pressures and fears of life.

**"I will give you rest"** - Christ never promised humans that there would be no hardships. Nevertheless, He promised rest during trials, since He bears them with, and for, us - thus, we do not feel their weight, and feel comforted and joyful for fellowshiping with Him.

Christ was incarnate in order to bear our burdens and sins on the Cross; His open arms alleviate our sins and their consequences, offering peace. He is capable of managing everything in our life.

#### **Vs. 29 & 30:**

**"My yoke"** - The yoke is the wooden beam placed across the necks of animals ploughing the field. "Carrying the yoke" implies bending the neck - hence, humility and enduring suffering for Christ's sake. Those are the attributes of Christ's followers.

**"Learn from Me"** - Our Lord Christ's conduct during His presence on earth set the ultimate example for humanity.

**"Gentle"** - This refers to Christ's maintaining his inner peace and serenity, being unperturbed by any loss or gain.

**"Lowly in heart"** - He relinquishes all His glory, placing Himself beneath everyone.

**"You will find rest for your souls"** - Gentleness and humility are the key to acquiring salvation.

The Lord's easy yoke and light burden comfort us, because He bears them with us. When two carry a load, the weight falls on the strongest. Since God's might is unlimited, He bears the full weight by sharing the load with us - thus, we feel no weariness. Rather, we enjoy fellowshiping with Him all our life, and we witness His work in us and in all those whom we serve, and with whom we deal.

+ *Humble yourself beneath the feet of all - then you will know God and enjoy association with Him.....Accept suffering for God's sake - you will see Him beside you encouraging you, gladdening your heart, and alleviating any pain or discomfort; because He supports you in all things.*

*Jesus eats with publicans and sinners*

## Chapter 12

### A pure heart breeds mercy and defeats demons

*(I) Plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (vs. 1 - 8)*

*"At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.'"* (Matthew 12:1 - 8)

**Vs. 1 & 2:**

*"The Sabbath"* - For Jews, that was the day of the Lord, since God had commanded that it be dedicated to worship. Jewish elders, though, had prohibited even necessary tasks on the Sabbath. In the New Testament, Sunday is the day of the Lord, since our Lord rose on Sunday - hence, Sunday's glory transcends Saturday's.

*"Through the grain fields"* - Our Lord went to the fields for seclusion with His disciples.

*"Began to pluck heads of grain"* - In those days it was permitted for the hungry to pluck heads of grain and eat them to satisfy their hunger. One may conclude from these verses that the disciples were so poor that they had no food, and needed their necessary daily sustenance.

*"What is not lawful to do"* - Performance of some tasks, including plucking heads of grain, was prohibited on the Sabbath. This was not stipulated in Mosaic law - rather, it was one of the erroneous interpretations added by the elders, conflicting with man's necessary needs. Christ was walking with His disciples in the fields, as He resumed teaching them. After a while, they hungered - thus they plucked the heads of grain to eat. This was permitted in Mosaic law and was not considered theft (Deuteronomy 23:25). The Pharisees, though, considered such an act to be "harvesting," hence, "work," hence, not permitted on the Sabbath. They thus criticized Christ for having permitted His disciples to do that.

The purpose of work prohibition on the Sabbath was to have it dedicated to worshipping God. Necessary tasks, such as eating, were permitted. Therefore, by falsely accusing Christ, the Pharisees' revealed their evil intent, by considering the disciples' satisfying their hunger to be "harvesting." They also revealed their erroneous interpretation of "rest" on the Sabbath.

**Vs. 3 & 4:**

**"The house of God"** - That was a reference to the tabernacle or tent of meeting.

**"Showbread"** - This consisted of twelve loaves to be placed on the altar in the temple, available only to the priests, who ate the bread. This refers to the grace associated with the sacrament of "Holy Orders" in the New Testament. Christ mentioned to the disciples what David had done on the Sabbath - namely, in order to satisfy their hunger, David plus those accompanying him, entered the temple, and ate of the showbread, although the priests were solely allowed to eat that bread. They ate out of necessity - to avoid collapsing from hunger. The highly-venerated king David was the Jews' learning reference; that example demonstrated David's correct interpretation of the commandment's intent - rather than its literal application. Clearly, David had not intended to break the commandment - circumstances required flexibility and understanding the spirit of the commandment. This was the first piece of evidence that the disciples had not erred in plucking the heads of grain.

**V. 5:**

**"The law"** - This consists of Moses' Pentateuch; the specific reference here is to the Book of Numbers which mentions sacrifices on the Sabbath.

**"Profane the Sabbath"** - This means "breaking the rest required on that day."

**"And are blameless"** - This is because they obey the law by offering the services stipulated therein.

Christ presented a second piece of evidence, namely, the work done by priests in the temple during the Sabbath. This is work associated with serving and worshipping God, and offering sacrifices - it is not their intent to break the Sabbath by carrying out those services. The commandment's intent is refraining from routine work and from material gain, in order to devote the time to spiritual work, while only performing life's necessities.

**V. 6:**

Preoccupation with the temple legitimizes any work or service which the temple necessitates. The Jewish temple refers to Christ, Who is Lord of the temple, and greater than the temple. He would offer Himself a sacrifice on

the altar of the Cross. Therefore, the disciples' eating the heads of grain to satisfy their hunger, while focusing their preoccupation on serving Christ and heeding His teaching, constitutes the most sublime goal.

**V. 7:**

*"The guiltless"* - Those were the poor disciples who were seeking to satisfy their hunger - they were innocent of any guilt.

Christ quoted God's words given in Hosea 6:6, namely, God desires *"mercy and not sacrifice."* This means that being merciful to others is more important than literal commitment to offering sacrifices, while judging others and harboring an unloving heart. How could they have possibly failed to appreciate the disciples' hunger and need for food?! Thus, the disciples' righteousness, as well as the Pharisees' wickedness and hardness of heart, were revealed.

**V. 8:**

*"Lord even of the Sabbath"* - This means that our Lord is the One Who instituted the law of the Sabbath. He alone can permit as He pleases, and add whatever is most significant. His resurrection on Sunday added its sanctification, making it the day of the Lord.

Christ confirmed that He authored the law, which included sanctification of the Sabbath; therefore, He would not desire to break the commandment - rather, its intent should be understood and applied correctly. This is the third piece of evidence that the disciples were justified in plucking the heads of grain - they were in the Lord's company, and He is capable of allowing what He pleases.

+ *Do not judge others by appearances; rather, seek excuses for them, and have mercy upon sinners - so God may be compassionate and merciful to you.*

**(II) Healing the man with the withered hand (vs. 9 - 13)**

*"Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'--that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, 'What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'" Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other." (Matthew 12:9 - 13)*

**Vs. 9 & 10:**

***"That they might accuse him"*** - This means they might file complaints against him in their local synagogues, claiming that he was an offender. After walking through the fields, Christ proceeded to one of the Jewish synagogues to teach, as was His wont. All the afflicted followed Him aspiring to be cured - a man with a withered hand came to Him hoping to be healed. The Pharisees, noticing that the man would ask Christ to heal him, hastened to ask Christ, cunningly, whether healing on the Sabbath was lawful. They assumed that healing was a worldly task, hence something that a physician would do to treat patients - not a miracle or an act of mercy that Christ would offer the needy. This accentuated their evil intent and their erroneous interpretation of the law.

**Vs. 11 - 13:**

Christ responded to their question by another query: *"If someone's sheep fell into a pit on a Sabbath, would he not hasten to rescue it and save it from death?"* Strictly speaking that would constitute prohibited work - but should it not be exempt and regarded as an act of mercy to save the sheep? How much more would this apply to a sick human being, who is more important than a sheep? Consequently, healing a person is allowed on the Sabbath, as an act of mercy. Then Christ, with His Divine power, ordered the sick man to stretch forth his withered hand. The man, believing, obeyed - and was cured instantly.

It should be noted that Christ simply ordered - without touching. The man stretched his hand - an act permitted on a Sabbath. He was healed. He did not contravene the Pharisees' narrow, erroneous, teachings. Thus they found him faultless.

Great, indeed, was that man's obedience! He believed Christ, despite his withered hand. He tried moving it - and succeeded.

+ *May you always obey God's commandments however difficult they may seem. May you always obey the Church's teachings, and the guidance of your confessor (spiritual father), trusting God's supporting strength - nothing will then seem impossible for you. Satan will delude you into believing that you are impotent and too weak to overcome sin and acquire virtues. Do not believe Satan and, rest assured, that obedience will release you from his clutches and grant you blessings.*

**(III) Christ's meekness (vs. 14 - 21)**

***"Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him. But when Jesus knew it, He withdrew from there. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all. Yet He warned them not to make Him known, that it might be fulfilled which was***

*spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him, And He will declare justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel nor cry out, Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench, Till He sends forth justice to victory; And in His name Gentiles will trust.""* (Matthew 12:14 - 21)

**Vs. 14 - 16:**

*"How they might destroy Him"* - That was the first attempt at killing Christ.

*"Great multitudes"* - As will be seen in Verse 21, the multitudes comprised both Jews and Gentiles.

The Pharisees were enraged, and tried to kill Christ, when their wickedness was exposed, versus Christ's righteousness and compassion towards His disciples and the afflicted. Christ, though, did not resist them using His Divine powers. Rather, he escaped, being preoccupied with fulfilling His mission of preaching and healing the needy. He also taught us to flee evil, rather than resist it with evil. Christ then hid amidst the multitude, continuing His teaching and doing good, being humble, and not seeking worldly glory.

**V. 17:**

This excerpt did not present Christ as the powerful Messiah, Whom the Jews expected would proceed to establish a kingdom for them, liberating them from the Romans' authority. Clearly, that was a false expectation which God had not intended. It was much more important to liberate them from sin, and reign over their hearts - not the delusion they had of an earthly king. For this reason, St. Matthew quoted Isaiah's prophecy concerning Christ (Isaiah 42:1 - 4), which accentuates Christ's meekness, and His principle of not resisting evil with evil.

**V. 18:**

*"Whom I have chosen"* - Christ is the only One chosen by God, capable of redeeming humanity. This task could not be achieved by any angel or human being.

*"In Whom My soul is well pleased"* - The Father proclaimed this from heaven during Christ's baptism in the Jordan. Christ is the Object of the Father's pleasure since He fulfilled our salvation.

*"I will put My Spirit upon Him"* - This is a proclamation that the Holy Spirit indwells the Son. The Holy Spirit also appeared as a Dove at the Son's baptism - but He is united with the Son since eternity because He is the Son's Spirit. This is thus a proclamation for us, humans, so that we may believe

that He is God.

**"The Gentiles"** - This is clear evidence that salvation is offered to the entire world.

The Father states that He puts His Spirit upon the Son. At the same time, The Father's Spirit is the Son's Spirit, namely, the Holy Spirit. The all-holy Trinity is proclaimed, appearing in the incarnate Son, Who proclaims the truth to humanity, lovingly and meekly - He thus says: **"My Servant....My Beloved."**

+ *By being united with Christ, becoming a member of His body - the Church - you become God's beloved, and He will be well-pleased in you.*

#### **V. 19:**

One of the meek Christ's attributes, is not responding to people's evil with another evil. He does not feud with evil-doers, and He does not vent rage in the streets thus offending others - because His genuine meekness leads to full inner peace.

#### **V. 20:**

Christ's love is demonstrated in His care for each and every human being, regardless of how weak or hopeless they may seem; this is analogous to an almost completely broken reed, or a smoking wick whose fire had died. He supports the weak until they gain might through being filled with Him, and until they conquer their sins and weaknesses, and secure a place in heaven. He supports the reed and rekindles fire in the wick, until His work is complete by showing the truth in all hearts, so that they may defeat, and liberate themselves from, sin.

#### **V. 21:**

Through this love, He imparts hope to the entire world. While Jews rejected the Gentiles for not knowing God, Christ, on the other hand, preached to them, seeking their salvation, regardless of their weaknesses, in order to induce them to abandon idolatry and return to Him.

+ *This great hope is offered to you, regardless of the extent of sin's control over you, or problems which seem unsolvable. Christ loves you, and is capable of delivering you from your hardships. Trust him, arise, and start a new life with Him.*

#### **(IV) Vanquishing Satan (vs. 22 - 30)**

**"Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, "Could this be**

*the Son of David?" Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad."'" (Matthew 12:22 - 30)*

**V. 22:**

A demon-possessed man had, as a result, lost his mind, eyesight, and ability to speak. When they brought him to Christ, Christ healed him, restoring his mind, eyesight and speech.

*+ Sin deprives you of sound reasoning - consequently, you fail to see God, and you do not verbalize His commandments. Do not delay your repentance - you will then regain your humanity in Christ.*

**Vs. 23 & 24:**

*"The Son of David"* - God had promised that Christ would come from the seed of David.

*"Beelzebub"* - The interpretation thereof is given in the write up for Chapter 10:24 & 25. Accusing Christ of having an association with Beelzebub was not only degrading to Christ, but also meant that Christ derived His power from Satan not God.

Upon witnessing the miracle's power, the Jews said that Christ was the awaited Messiah, the Son of David. On the other hand, the Pharisees' pride and love of social standing, led them to regard Christ as their competitor, since He had become the Jews' spiritual leader, causing a loss of their stature. Therefore, they hastened to resist the miracle, accusing Christ of collaborating with Beelzebub the chief demon who, in turn, had exorcized that demon leading to the man's restoration to his normal self. Put differently, they accused Christ of sorcery and association with demons. Their goal was to distance people from Him and downplay fascination with His Divine powers.

**Vs. 25 & 26:**

***"But Jesus knew their thoughts"*** - This demonstrates Christ's Divinity, and His knowledge of the unknown as well as people's thoughts. Our Lord Christ presented the Pharisees with a logical argument against their accusation, in order to edify the Jews in their faith and their adherence to Him, and eliminate any doubts they might have had. He said that no kingdom can survive an internal division - since one side will resist the other, and the kingdom will fall as a result. Analogously, by applying this concept to Satan's kingdom, it would mean that Beelzebub would absolve his followers from evil, which is contrary to his plan, since his plan is to harm humans and keep them away from God. Consequently, Satan cannot possibly work against himself - otherwise his kingdom would fall, which is illogical. Consequently, exorcizing that demon could only have been realized through the power of God - not through collaboration with Satan.

**V. 27:**

Christ subsequently offered a second argument, namely, His disciples. Not only was their simplicity well-known to the Jews, but they had also cast out demons, and were sons of the Jewish nation. They had no experience in dealing with demons, or in any form of sorcery. It follows that the disciples' exorcizing demons was proof that the Pharisees' allegations were false. Furthermore, the Jews had not objected against those disciples who had exorcized demons (see also Acts 19:14 ***"the seven sons of Sceva"***). It was therefore unreasonable to accuse Christ falsely; the Pharisees' motives were sheer envy, and the desire to infuse doubts about Christ's Divine powers.

**V. 28:**

The demon was exorcized solely through the power of the Spirit of God - not through sorcery. This means that Christ was the awaited Messiah.

***"The kingdom of God has come upon you"*** - This means that Christ has come to reign over hearts - why then, are you resisting Him with your evil thoughts?

**V. 29:**

Christ presented a third argument proving that He had exorcized the demon through His Divine power. He said that binding a strong man was a necessary prerequisite before attempting to rob him of his possessions. Consequently, it is impossible to cast out demons from a person, unless we had the power to bind the demons, then order them to leave that person. Put differently, Christ was more powerful than the demons; therefore He was capable of casting them out of humans.

**V. 30:**

Satan is definitely Christ's enemy, attempting to stray people away from Christ, since he is unrighteous, is not Christ's follower, and does not incite humans to believe on Christ. Thus, Satan indwells people, deceiving them, and causing them to lose their minds and vision. On the other hand, Christ, through His Divine authority, pushes away His demoniac enemies from weak humans, since He came into the world to save mankind from Satan's grip, who controls humans due to their weaknesses and sinfulness. The Pharisees' accusations, and attempts to keep people away from Him, rendered them followers of Satan and enemies of Christ.

The discussion above constitutes Christ's fourth argument, proving that He was against, not for, the demons. He presented it in order to rebuke the Pharisees and have them repent and revoke their enmity towards Him - since, through their wickedness; they became followers of the demons who try to keep people away from God.

*+ Scrutinize your words and deeds: do they draw people closer to God, or do they offend people and push them away from God? You will then know whether you are a follower of Christ or Satan.*

**(V) Evil speech (vs. 31 - 37)**

*"Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:31 - 37)*

**Vs. 31 & 32:**

Christ alerted the Pharisees to the risk they incurred, by accusing Him of exorcizing demons through collaboration with them, rather than through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Their continued rejection of the action of the Holy Spirit, coupled with

disbelieving Christ, would never be forgiven them, and would lead them directly to eternal perdition. Christ was alerting them to the necessity of repentance and cessation of their evil thoughts, without delay.

Whoever speaks against Christ and repents, will be forgiven. On the other hand, the recipe for eternal perdition consists of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, rejecting His work in our life, and persisting down the avenue of non repentance.

### **Vs. 33 - 35:**

Christ rebuked the Pharisees' hypocrisy: feigning piety, their hearts were filled with evil and pride. He said that a good tree yields good fruit, while a bad tree yields rotten fruit. He called on them to forsake hypocrisy, match their beliefs to their words and deeds, and purify their thoughts. Put differently, He called on them to purify themselves from within as well as from without. Any residual wickedness in the heart would then be manifested in words or deeds - thus helping them to repent and reject sin.

Christ's deeds, filled with goodness and mercy, were righteous deeds, proving His righteousness and uprightness. On the other hand, the Pharisees' pride and evil accusations against Christ proved their wickedness - their evil fruit was a manifestation of their evil hearts.

Furthermore, Christ rebuked them, likening their hypocrisy unto snakes in their outward smooth appearance, concealing their poisonous savage interior, and affinity to devour other beings. In this way, Christ called upon the Pharisees to purge their hearts from the hypocrisy which manifested itself in their speech and accusations.

### **Vs. 36 & 37:**

**"Every idle word"** - This refers to useless words, or words that serve no purpose, particularly, evil talk which harms others.

Christ accentuated the danger of gossip - since we will be held accountable for it on judgment day. We should not take lightly anything we say that is harmful to others. Speaking righteously gives us credit on the last day.

Conversely, evil talk, revealing our hearts' wickedness, leads to perdition.

+ *Today, scrutinize your speech: Is it useful for you or for others - is it harmful - is it useless? Ask God for help - He will grant you wisdom through His Holy Spirit.*

### **(VI) The necessity of repentance (vs. 38 - 45)**

**"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will**

*be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation."* (Matthew 12:38 - 45)

**V. 38:**

*"Teacher"* - Seeking another miracle, the scribes and Pharisees used this title either to mock or flatter Christ. They adamantly refused to believe on Christ despite the abundance of miracles He had performed. They asked Him for yet another miracle so that they may believe - thus proving their persistent doubts which impede faith.

**Vs. 39 & 40:**

*"This generation"* - This refers to the Jewish nation, most of which had strayed away from God through their wickedness, despite being labelled *"His people."*

*"Evil and adulterous"* - The Jewish nation is the bride of God. Straying away from Him constitutes spiritual adultery.

*"Three days"* - The Jews considered "part of a day" to be "a full day." Christ died part of Friday, all of Saturday and part of Sunday.

*"Three nights"* - This refers to the darkness which reigned at Christ's death on the Cross, plus the nights of Saturday and Sunday.

*"The heart of the earth"* - This refers to Christ's tomb.

Christ rebuked their hearts' wickedness, and their perseverance in pride and doubts. He told them that they did not need to witness another miracle, rather, they needed to repent - just like Jonah's miracle of repentance: he repented in the belly of the great fish, after having spent three days there - he had died to the world, he returned to God, and the fish expelled him - alive. Analogously, Christ would die for the sins of the entire world, but, through His Divine power, He would rise from the dead. Thus, they needed

to die to their sins through repentance, believe on Him, emerge from their evil, and start a new life with Him.

**V. 41:**

*"Nineveh"* - This was the Assyrian capital, situated by the River Tigris in Iraq, close to today's Mosul. It was a great city, with a circumference of about twelve kilometers, surrounded by a mud-brick wall about ten meters high. It was destroyed in the sixth century B.C.

Following his repentance, Jonah called, in no uncertain terms, upon the Ninevites to repent; they responded positively and repented. However, at this point, the Jews were faced with much more powerful preaching than Jonah's - not to mention the great miracles - nevertheless, they refused to believe. For this reason, the Ninevites' repentance will condemn, on the last day, the disbelief of those who had rejected Christ.

**V. 42:**

*"The ends of the earth"* - Reference here, is to the farthest point in southern Arabia from Judea - hundreds of kilometers.

The queen of Sheba, was queen of a land situated in the farthest coast of Arabia, at the mouth of the Arabian Sea. She had journeyed from a very distant land to listen to Solomon's wisdom. She believed through the action of the Holy Spirit in him. Her faith will also condemn the Jews who rejected Christ, whose preaching and perfect wisdom were manifested before them.

**Vs. 43 & 44:**

*"Dry places"* - Satan tends to inhabit desolate places, devoid of water.

*"Seeking rest"* - This means "seeking to do evil," since his rest lies in distancing people from God.

When through the power of God, a demon is exorcized, forcing to leave a person whom he had possessed, he wanders around, seeking to possess someone else. Having no life in people's righteousness, he returns to his old friend whom he had possessed for a long time; he finds his heart free from any goodness, swept from all righteousness, and adorned with the wickedness in which he had lived. Although he had rid himself of the demon, he had not abandoned his evil lifestyle, and was not leading a godly life.

**V. 45:**

Upon finding that person even more ready, than earlier, to be possessed, he takes with him seven other demons. They possess him, leading him into more wickedness, thus increasing his wretchedness - ending in perdition.

Analogously, during their captivity, the Jews practiced idolatry. Although they had abandoned those practices after their return, their hearts remained barren and had not adhered to God. When Christ came and preached to them, they rejected Him. Pride and hypocrisy compounded their sins. In this way they had prepared themselves to receive Satan's work more than before. Their suffering and perdition would therefore be more severe.

*+ Whenever God delivers you from a particular sin, or gives you temporary respite from it, hasten to adhere to the Church and the holy sacraments, and persist in prayers and godly reading; this will fill your heart with the love of God, and immunize you against any further satanic attacks.*

**(VII) Christ's relatives (vs. 46 - 50)**

***"While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You." But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.""*** (Matthew 12:46 - 50)

**Vs. 46 & 47:**

While Christ was preaching to the multitude, His mother St. Mary came along with her sister's children - children of Cleopas; the Jews considered first cousins to be "brothers." They had come seeking to enjoy His company and to talk with Him. They could not reach Him due to the crowds - so He was informed that His mother and brothers were looking for Him.

**V. 48:**

Christ seized that opportunity to teach the multitudes the meaning of spiritual motherhood and brotherhood. While never denying the importance of biological motherhood and brotherhood, He accentuated a new meaning, namely, we should have, spiritually, many mothers and brothers.

**Vs. 49 & 50:**

Christ stated that His spiritual mothers and brothers are those who kept His commandments and did His will, such as the disciples who followed Him. Motherhood means selflessness and sacrifice. Brotherhood means fellowship and bonding. Whoever does the will of God must relinquish his personal desires, and seek to bond with God, and with the entire world,

through his love. In so doing, he develops spiritual motherhood and brotherhood to God, and to his brothers in church and in the whole world.

*+ It is indeed a great honor to be esteemed by Christ, and to be invited to become His brother. He consequently grants you preference in prayer, and trust in His help, however low you may have sunk into sin, in order for you to repent and return to Him.*

*From another perspective, you maintain your purity, since you are Christ's spiritual brother. You will also feel that all believers in church are brothers - hence, you take care to love and honor them.*

## Chapter 13

### Christ's parables - evangelizing in His homeland

*(I) Parable of the sower (vs. 1 - 9)*

*"On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*" (Matthew 13:1 - 9)

**Vs. 1 & 2:**

*"By the sea"* - That was the sea of Galilee. As was their wont, the multitudes followed Christ to relish His life-giving teachings. As their numbers increased, and being close to the sea, Christ boarded one of the boats and pushed a short distance from shore – that became His pulpit from which to address the multitudes. The crowds sat on shore to listen to Him.

Great indeed is Christ's simplicity and humility! He taught atop the mountain, on the shore, or from a boat which He used as a pulpit. His most significant preoccupation was winning the hearts of the crowds, while communicating to them His spiritual aphorisms.

Christ *"went out of the house,"* where He was residing, and which symbolizes the Church from whence He exited to reach out to His congregation. He *"sat by the sea,"* which symbolizes the world, *"but He got into a boat,"* which symbolizes the human soul that is indwelt by Christ, and from which He manifests Himself to others. That is what He does through His children - the believers - who are the light of the world.

**V. 3:**

*"He spoke many things to them"* - One can conclude that the holy Bible records only a subset of what Christ had said.

*"Parables"* - Their purpose was clarification of the spiritual reality through narratives of practical applications. Understanding of the spiritual reality is

facilitated through such narratives - hence, parables.

**"The sower"** - He symbolizes God.

The sower used seeds - those are God's words which He gives to the various kinds of humans, symbolized by the different types of earth. The manner and extent of acceptance of the word of God differs from one person to the other. The sower went out to sow. The goal of God's word is goodness - He disseminates His word to all, so that it may be fruitful. Similarly, God's children are tasked with doing good for everyone, regardless of the recipients' response or reaction.

#### **V. 4:**

The first type of earth is the road passing through the fields. It is slightly elevated above the fields, it is hard and unfit for any kind of agriculture, and is constantly trodden underfoot by pedestrians.

This refers to the boastful human soul, unprepared for ploughing to receive the word of God; preparedness consists of self-examination and repentance. The hardness of that earth refers to the hard heart which rejects the word of God. Being trodden by everyone is a reference to that heart's openness to all worldly pleasures - it is unprotected by the Church. Such a person is quickly gladdened by the word of God, but the heart never accepts it. The birds descend quickly upon it and consume all the seeds.

Birds refer to demons that steal the word - since the heart is only temporarily affected. That effect is short-lived due to pride and lack of repentance from all the heart's lusts.

#### **Vs. 5 & 6:**

The second kind is the stony ground, covered by a thin layer of apparently good soil. Despite its good appearance, it rejects all kinds of cultivation. It refers to unresponsive hearts and idolatry - symbolizing worshipping this world's wealth and material acquisitions, tantamount to idols to which humans adhere. Although the superficial layer of soil permits limited seeds' growth, the roots cannot grow because of the stony ground underneath. The sun's rays dry those small plants and they die. This could also refer to hypocritical souls, which have the appearance of being good soil, but having a stony foundation. It refers to hearts adhering to the world. They accept the word for a limited time, but when exposed to trials - symbolized by the sun's rays - they wither and the word of God perishes therein. Those are hard selfish hearts that hate God.

#### **V. 7:**

The third type is the good earth which, although fit for cultivation, is filled with

thorns, which refer to the heart's preoccupation with the world's lusts. When the word of God is sowed in it, it grows - but the surrounding thorns and weeds are stronger, covering and choking it, thus depriving it of nutrition and the sun's rays.

This refers to the danger of retaining sin's lusts in the heart, since they impede the work of the word of God, and the person does not benefit from it. Clearly, the remedy is repentance and ridding oneself from the thorns of sin - then the word may be effective in those souls.

#### **V. 8:**

The fourth type is the good earth well-suited for cultivation. When the word of God is sown in it, it flourishes and brings forth fruit. The amount of fruit depends on the extent of the soil's fertility and its response to the word of God. They are all children of the kingdom. A star differs from another in accordance with its absorption and application of the word of God.

#### **V. 9:**

Christ confirmed the importance of listening to His words with both ears - meaning the external ear and the internal one, hence, the heart. Then the word would be heard and applied.

*+ It is important to respond positively to God's offer of grace and love to all mankind. We should never reject God's word that He sends to us through the holy Bible, the Church's teachings, guidance by the confessor (spiritual father), or advice from godly friends.*

*Accept the word, not only for teaching others, but also for application in your life. Rest assured that all efforts at obeying God's word are pleasing to Him, and He will support and reward you, for achieving that goal.*

#### **(II) The parables' significance (vs. 10 - 17)**

*"And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 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. 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. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 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; 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.' "But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; 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."* (Matthew 13:10 - 17)

**Vs. 10 - 12:**

*"Came"* - After the multitudes had dispersed a few remained behind and approached Christ asking Him questions.

*"The disciples"* - Those were the twelve, plus other Christ's followers - see also Mark 4:10; they could have been among the seventy plus the Marys.

*"It has been given to you"* - This is special grace granted to ardent seekers of the knowledge of God.

*"The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven"* - This means "how God reigns over hearts." God's knowledge transcends all human intellect. But through His grace, God grants understanding to whoever is prepared to accept Him.

*"To them"* - This refers to the nonchalant about the word of God, due to their preoccupation with material issues. Their knowledge is always superficial. Christ addressed the multitudes using parables close to their every-day life, to facilitate their understanding and application; hardened hearts would lead to rejection of more direct instruction.

On the other hand, the disciples were willing to accept Christ; therefore, He interpreted the parables to them with direct spiritual instruction. Whoever is spiritually ready, is given increasing knowledge of God. Those who are unwilling, persevering in their rejection, will neither understand nor accept even the parables; their pride and adherence to the material world will wipe out even the dwindling spiritual perception they may have.

**Vs. 13 - 15:**

*"Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive"* - Despite their having seen Christ and heard His teachings, they failed to appreciate the profoundness of His words for application in their lives - they contented themselves with superficial knowledge. They may even go as far as rejecting His words and their spiritual implications, because of adherence to pride and material pleasures.

*"For the hearts of this people have grown dull"* - This means that their hearts had clung to earthly pleasures, becoming unresponsive to the word of God.

*"Their ears are hard of hearing"* - They became incapable of understanding the word of God, because lusts dulled their hearing, and they wished to hear only that which pleased them.

***"So that I should heal them"*** - This means *"so that I should accept their repentance, and rectify their lives rendering them spiritual."*

Despite their possessing external eyes and ears discerning letters and words, their hearts rejected God. According to the prophecies, they were expecting to see the awaited Messiah. However, when the incarnate Christ walked among them, they rejected Him due to their pride and hardness of heart, and their adherence to their honor and an earthly kingdom. They had thus lost their spiritual perception, as was prophesied by their great prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:10).

### **Vs. 16 & 17:**

Christ's disciples had understood His words, enjoyed fellowshiping with Him, and believed that He was indeed the awaited Messiah. Therefore, not only did He praise them, but He also proclaimed that many Old Testament prophets and righteous people had yearned to see what they had seen, yet they had not; they merely had the honor of prophesying His advent, while awaiting fulfillment of His promise with their souls bound in hades, expecting to be redeemed and saved after His coming.

*+ Dear brothers and sisters, this is precisely what you witness and experience today in church: you receive the true body and blood of Christ, and you enjoy listening to the word of God through the holy Bible; all the Old Testament men of God desired to have this experience - but never had it. Therefore, seize and enjoy the opportunity of living in and through Christ. Attend Divine Liturgies regularly, making sure you arrive at the very beginning, and ensuring you receive the blessings of confession and the sacrament of communion regularly.*

### **(III) Interpretation of the parable of the sower (vs. 18 - 23)**

***"Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."*** (Matthew 13:18 - 23)

These verses were expounded earlier (see verses 1 through 9). Additionally, some expressions are clarified below.

**Vs. 18 & 19:**

**"The word of the kingdom"** - This is the word of God; when you understand and apply it, your heart becomes ready for God to reign over it.

**"Does not understand"** - This is the person who refuses to understand God's words, due to his preoccupation with material issues.

**"The wicked one"** - This is Satan.

**"Snatches away"** - This means that the effect is temporary - like a very short-lived emotional reaction. Such a person would not apply anything he had heard in his life.

**V. 20:**

**"Immediately receives it"** - This refers to being influenced immediately by the word of God, and having the intent to apply it.

**V. 21:**

**"He has no root in himself"** - This refers to the person who had not struggled down the godly path for any length of time, with the purpose of applying the word of God. Put differently, he is superficially, emotionally, influenced - but the heart remains weak due to worldly preoccupations.

**"Tribulation or persecution"** - These are problems impeding a person's application of the commandments.

**"He stumbles"** - This means that the person abandons God's commandments and resumes a worldly lifestyle.

**V. 22:**

**"The cares of this world"** - This refers to anxiety and concerns pertaining to worldly acquisitions and pleasures.

**"Deceitfulness of riches"** - This is a person's pride, having amassed material gains making him feel superior to others.

**"Choke the word"** - This means that no room is available for the word of God, due to evil pleasures.

**"Becomes unfruitful"** - This means that the person's life is devoid of virtues.

**V. 23:**

**"Good"** - This refers to the earth which had been ploughed, fertilized and irrigated, symbolizing a person's self-examination, repentance, and spiritual struggle in utilizing the various avenues of grace offered through the sacraments and spiritual practices.

***"Who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty"*** - These are the degrees of various people's spiritual struggle and response to the word of God, yielding virtues. This, in turn, results in an increase in God's grace towards them, reflected in their increasing holiness.

***(IV) Parable of the wheat and tares (vs. 24 - 30)***

***"Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. 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?' 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?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. 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.'"*** (Matthew 13:24 - 30)

**V. 24:**

***"The kingdom of heaven"*** - This is Christ's reign descending from heaven to be established over His children's hearts.

***"A man"*** - This refers to God, Who created all mankind in His likeness and image, to live with Him eternally in His kingdom, and to yield the fruits of good deeds.

**V. 25:**

***"While men slept"*** - Those are the people responsible for cultivation, symbolizing the priests and servants. This refers to lack of spiritual watchfulness and care for the congregation.

***"His enemy"*** - This is Satan. He is neither the enemy of the servants nor the wheat, rather, he is the enemy of God and His children. Seizing the opportunity of the servants' heedlessness, he sowed tares, which symbolize heresies, sown by heretics in some people's hearts, distancing them from God. Tares could also refer to the sins and lusts defiling people's hearts, turning them to wickedness, failing to yield the Divine expectation of good fruit.

***"Tares"*** - These are harmful weeds whose seeds resemble wheat grains.

***"Went his way"*** - He went away under cover of darkness as though he had done nothing, despite his being the cause of all evil in the world.

+ *My dear brother, the necessity of spiritual watchfulness, for each and every one of us, cannot be over-emphasized. Spiritual watchfulness imparts protection against evil thoughts and ungodly desires. It is equally incumbent on servants - to ensure that those whom they serve do not become tares astray from God.*

**V. 26:**

After the seeds had grown, the different-looking tares - bad weeds - appeared amongst them. You recognize them by their fruit: grain seeds produced wheat, but the tares, whose seeds initially resembled grain, failed to produce well-known wheat. God's children's deeds are righteous, but the wicked's deeds are evil.

**Vs. 27 & 28:**

*"The servants of the owner"* - These refer to the spiritual servants, including bishops and priests. They noticed the presence of evil-doers in the world, drifting away from God; their fruit was noticeably different from the well loved wheat. They were astonished at this anomaly, since they had expected a good harvest from all plants, because everything planted by God is good. Upon questioning the owner about the tares' presence, he informed them that it was the enemy's - Satan's - work. Satan had planted his seeds in the field - hence, evil in some people's hearts, causing them to drift away from God, thus failing to produce good fruit. Then they asked him whether they should remove the tares from the wheat; put differently, "Should evil-doers of the world be sentenced to perdition?"

**V. 29:**

God refused removal of the tares, lest they should harm the original plants in the field; furthermore, destroying the wicked would deprive them of the opportunity to repent, and could offend or alarm God's children - since their God is loving and compassionate. By destroying all the wicked, they would be terrified and unable to repent or resume their struggle due to their extreme fear. Peter who had denied Christ, repented and became an evangelist. Matthew the publican became a disciple. Saul, Christianity's bitter enemy, became Christianity's servant and great apostle Paul. Therefore, God did not remove the tares since, through repentance, they could become wheat. Therefore, there are two types of evil-doers. Those who persist in their wickedness are destined to perdition. The second type will repent and be saved. The tares should therefore not be removed, lest the wheat be removed with them. Put differently, God's children who had strayed, fallen into sin, and become similar to tares, could repent, return to producing good

fruit, and become good wheat.

+ *Seize the opportunity of your life, repent, and cast from you the tare seeds; then you will yield good fruit and achieve a righteous life with God.*

### **V. 30:**

God ordered that all plants be given a full opportunity for growth. This serves a dual purpose: the righteous would be tested for rejecting the evil surrounding them, and the wicked could be enlightened by the righteous around them, and repent.

However, a terrible fate awaits evil-doers who persist in their wickedness, namely, eternal torment in groups - "**bundles**;" as they had clustered in the world's evil pleasures, they will continue in eternal perdition. The righteous will be gathered into God's "**barn**," namely, the kingdom of heaven, to delight in fellowshiping with God, each according to his toil and fruit.

### **(V) Parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (vs. 31 - 33)**

*"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, 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." Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." (Matthew 13:31 - 33)*

### **Vs. 31 & 32:**

*"Mustard seed"* - This is the smallest of seeds; however, when buried, it endures all the dirt and darkness and, despite its apparent weakness, it grows and becomes stronger and greater than all the other surrounding trees, through the work of the Holy Spirit. It becomes so great that the birds nest in it.

The mustard seed symbolizes the Christian, or Christ, Who endures suffering unto death. He then acquires a great life in heaven. By enduring suffering and carrying the cross, man's thoughts sublime and become celestial, like the birds soaring in the heavens.

The mustard seed symbolizes the Gospel's good news, and the Church which started as a small group in Judea. Within a few years its spread throughout the entire world was ubiquitous. It embodied countless souls that believed and praised God like the birds.

The mustard seed is like the faith tested in trials - it grows and becomes a great tree.

**V. 33:**

**"A woman"** - This refers to the Church, which conceals the **"leaven,"** meaning Christ - and through His incarnation, He lives in our midst. He transforms the **"meal"** - symbolizing humanity - to spiritually active believers, influencing others and attracting them to the Faith.

**"Three measures"** - This symbolizes the spirit, the soul, and the body, referring to Christ when He took our human nature, transcending us to a spiritual nature, through His redemption and the action of the Holy Spirit within us.

The **"woman"** could symbolize the Jews who crucified Christ - through His death and burial He renewed the human nature to live through Him.

The **"woman"** could also symbolize God, Who planted the **"leaven"** - hence, Church - in the world (the **"meal"**); the Church then attracted souls to the Faith, which spread throughout the world.

*+ Retain the word of God in your heart, and apply it throughout your lifestyle, allowing it to change your attitude, thoughts and conduct. Ensure that your life is constantly renewed through regular meditation on the word of God. At that stage, you will inadvertently influence those around you, and attract them to a godly lifestyle.*

**(VI) Teaching through parables (vs. 34 & 35)**

**"All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: 'I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.'"** (Matthew 13:34 & 35)

**V. 34:**

At that point, all of Christ's teachings were through parables. Before and after that point in time, His teachings were direct; put differently, He used all methods of teaching.

**V. 35:**

**"The prophet"** - The prophet is Asaph, and this quotation is taken from Psalm 78:2.

**"Things kept secret"** - This refers to God's spiritual economy for mankind's salvation, which was too difficult for humans to understand being impeded by sinfulness. Christ proclaims it in the New Testament: this is His love for mankind, which resided in His heart since the foundation of the world and man's creation.

Matthew habitually quoted prophecies to confirm his statements, since he was addressing Jews who were familiar with the scriptures, hence the Divine quotation through Asaph: ***"I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old."*** (Psalm 78:2)

+ God's love has been boundless since eternity. He desires to proclaim it to you once you open your heart and be attentive to Him. This is possible through your seeking Him by reading the holy Bible, be closely attached to the Church, heeding spiritual sermons, and taking care to learn from others, especially spiritual fathers and servants.

***(VII) Interpretation of the tares of the field (vs. 36 - 43)***

***"Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*** (Matthew 13:36 - 43)

***"The house"*** - This was most likely Simon Peter's house.

***"His disciples"*** - This refers to the twelve plus other close followers.

***"His kingdom"*** - This is the world which God had created over which to reign, but evil-doers rejected His reign.

***"Things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness"*** - Those are the evil-doers whose wickedness offends others causing them to fall into sin.

***"The furnace of fire"*** - This refers to the eternal torment prepared for the wicked.

***"Wailing and gnashing of teeth"*** - This refers to everlasting regret, suffering and rage, experienced by those who are eternally tormented.

***"As the sun"*** - This means "in luminous splendour and glory."

***"The kingdom of their Father"*** - This is the eternal kingdom which God's children enjoy through fellowship with Him.

Christ interpreted to His disciples the parable of the tares and the field as they had requested. This is because spiritual gifts are only granted to those

who seek, and ask God for, them. On the other hand, God grants material gifts to all - hence, His sun shines on the righteous and the wicked. God's children shine, as the sun and stars, in His kingdom; this is their heavenly Father, Whom they loved, and in Whose faith they had remained steadfast throughout their lives. His light shines upon them, and He glorifies them in heaven.

Verses 24 - 30, discussed earlier, complement this interpretation.

***(VIII) Parable of the hidden treasure and the priceless pearl (vs. 44 - 46)***

***""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. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:44 - 46)***

***(IX) Parable of the net cast into the sea (vs. 47 - 50)***

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

Christ said the three parables given in verses 44 - 50 in the house to His disciples and other close followers. The four earlier parables were said to all the multitudes. The reason is that the latter three call upon the spiritual person to abandon all worldly preoccupations for the sake of God's love. In the final parable, the spiritual person is encouraged by the heavenly reward. Those are thus parables aimed at God's children - not intended for the entire world.

**Vs. 44:**

***"Treasure"*** - This is Christ as mentioned in the holy Bible.

***"Field"*** - This refers to the holy Bible.

***"Joy"*** - This refers to the spiritual comfort which a person derives from spiritual practices, and which motivates him to relinquish everything for the sake of his continued enjoyment of that comfort.

In order to incorporate the holy Bible in our hearts, and live through and enjoy

the holy Bible's Christ, we should purge our hearts from all material attachments, and be prepared to relinquish all. We should liken ourselves to Joseph, who left his garment in the hands of his master's wife, and accepted to be jailed; he was consequently elevated to Egypt's throne, acquiring wealth and authority - he even distributed Egypt's produce to all the surrounding regions.

The "**field**" may also refer to Christ, and the "**treasure**" may refer to Christ's profound words, which a believer understands through submission to the Holy Spirit indwelling him. This is the believer who severed all attachments to worldly acquisitions, and whose spirit is dedicated to understand God. That is how God reigns over one's heart, and how a believer would have a share in the kingdom of heaven.

**Vs. 45 - 46:**

The "**pearl of great price**" refers to Christ's love. The "**merchant**" is the spiritual person who seeks the truth; he tries to acquire pearls, which refer to virtues. Since Christ's love transcends all virtues, its value exceeds all worldly acquisitions, including all material pleasures, regardless of their glamour. That merchant was so delighted with Christ's love, that he abandoned everything in this world, and all that he considered perishing, in order to gain Christ. At that point, Christ would reign over his heart, as a deposit for the eternal kingdom.

*+ Stay away from carnal pleasures, worldly preoccupations, and desires of the flesh, all of which obstruct your soul's salvation. Rather, assign a high priority to your relationship with God. If worldly issues were at variance with your spiritual life, then exercise your will power to overcome them and secure your soul's salvation, and to enjoy serving others to win them over to Christ, through love.*

The parable of the net cast into the sea was the seventh and last of Christ's teachings during that day. He spoke of fishing, since some of Christ's disciples were fishermen; He spoke of fishing to facilitate their understanding of His intent.

**"A dragnet that was cast into the sea"** - This refers to Christ or the Church, calling all to the Faith. Believers from all walks of life enter it, and find salvation and deliverance from evil.

**"The sea"** - This refers to the world, filled with perturbations and wickedness, in which the children of God also live.

**"Gathered some of every kind"** - This means that the Church welcomes all believers indiscriminately and regardless of their habits. Some of them are

avid believers, while others are hypocrites, seeking only the appearance of piety, while insisting on non repentance and their old sinful habits. They all lead their entire lives in church, without any Divine segregation; in this way, God gives a chance to the wicked to repent, and to the righteous to remain steadfast.

**"When it was full"** - This refers to humanity's end of life and the arrival of judgment day.

**"They drew to shore"** - This refers to all the souls being brought before the Judge on judgment day.

**"They sat down"** - This means that God, the just Judge, sat with all His angels to judge all humans.

**"The good"** - Those are the righteous who were steadfast in the Faith and holiness throughout their lives.

**"Vessels"** - Those are the great abodes in glory; they exist in the kingdom of heaven and are prepared for the children of God.

**"The bad"** - Those are the wicked who feigned a relationship with God, despite their nonchalance and persistence in wickedness.

**"Away"** - This means "outside the eternal heavenly kingdom."

*+ Life is an opportunity for repentance and for edifying our sonship to God. We should not be perturbed by frequent falls. The most important thing is rapid repentance, coupled with the avenues of grace available through the Church, making up for what we missed, while edifying us in a spiritual life.*

**(X) The educated scribe (vs. 51 - 53)**

***"Jesus said to them, 'Have you understood all these things?' They said to Him, 'Yes, Lord.' 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.' Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, that He departed from there."*** (Matthew 13:51 - 53)

**V. 51:**

Our Lord Christ ensured that the disciples had understood His parables, so that they may apply them in their lives.

**V. 52:**

Our Lord Christ clarified to His disciples how to become well-versed in the truth - the word of God. That was unlike the Jewish scribes, who were tasked with writing the Holy Scriptures, paying great attention to each letter, while neglecting the application in their lives.

Christ likened the spiritual writer, well educated in the word of God, unto

someone owning a house - which is his life, wholly dependent on the word of God. He extracts from the holy Bible useful meanings: from "*things new*" (the New Testament) and "*old*" (the Old Testament.) He lives through them and they guide him to a lifestyle with God.

**V. 53:**

Having completed His teachings, through those parables, to the multitudes and His disciples, Christ left that place and proceeded elsewhere to continue evangelizing.

+ *Take great care to read both Testaments of the holy Bible. You will thus glean spiritual meanings for application in your life, and care for your soul's salvation. You will then be able to teach others what you would have experienced.*

**(XI) Evangelizing in His own country (vs. 54 - 58)**

*"And when He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?" So they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house." Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief."* (Matthew 13:54 - 58)

**V. 54:**

Christ came to Nazareth where He had been raised. He was One of its citizens. He entered their Jewish synagogue and taught His powerful teachings. They were amazed at His miracles and the power of His aphorisms.

+ *It is important for each person to care for the spiritual well-being of his family and relatives. When difficulty is encountered in their accepting his words, he can resort to praying for them, and to indirect teaching, such as talking about what he had heard in the church's sermons, or what he had read in the holy Bible plus other spiritual books. If they regarded him favorably, he could speak to them directly. Another avenue could be asking some of the church's servants to try attracting them closer to God.*

**Vs. 55 & 56:**

The Jews' amazement failed to motivate them to believe. They failed to go

beyond being merely astonished. They knew that He was the Son of Joseph and Mary, and they also knew His relatives whose names had been mentioned - the sons of Mary, the sister of Christ's mother - the wife of Cleopas. They had never imagined that the awaited Messiah would be a normal Person from among their midst, although the prophecies stated this clearly.

**Vs. 57 & 58:**

Due to their having been fixated on His biological origins and relatives, they were incapable of believing on His Divinity. They had a common idiom, that a prophet is without honor in his homeland. Their knowledge of His origins led them to treat Him as a normal person like any other.

Because of their weak faith and their disbelief, He performed only a limited number of miracles there.

*+ God is prepared to work in your life, according to your faith, your adherence to Him, and your quest to know Him. Open your heart to discipleship and to learning from those around you. Do not treat lightly any member of your family or relatives. That person could be the Divine image that God offers you in a simple form, for the benefit of teaching you. That person could be a child or someone of a modest social standing.*

## Chapter 14

### The murder of John the Baptist - Christ feeds the multitude, walks on water, and heals afflictions

*(I) The murder of John the Baptist (vs. 1 - 12)*

*"At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him." For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Because John had said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter." And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus." (Matthew 14:1 - 12)*

**Vs. 1 & 2:**

*"At that time"* - This means *"while Christ was evangelizing."*

*"Herod"* - This is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the great (who had murdered Bethlehem's babies); Pilate would send Christ to him for trial prior to the crucifixion. He ruled over the northern part of Judea which included Samaria and Galilee. Upon hearing of Christ's evangelism, he thought that Christ was the resurrected, murdered, John the Baptist - he had feared John and his rebuke since John always spoke the truth.

*"The tetrarch"* - This is one of the four regions into which the Romans had divided Judea - they had appointed Herod ruler over one of them

**Vs. 3 - 5:**

Herod had desired Herodias, his brother's wife - so he forcefully took her while his brother yet lived; no one had dared oppose him, fearing his power and ruthlessness. John the Baptist, though, the man of the wilderness, who feared no one due to his full submission to God, rebuked Herod, and told him to return Herodias to his brother, and repent. Herod did not repent, rather,

he jailed John, attempting to silence him; he even tried to have him killed, but did not, fearing the people - since John was much loved.

+ *Do not try to silence your conscience and the voice of the Holy Spirit. Rather, submit to Him, and He will continue condemning you until your repentance - not only in this life, but also unto the eternal final torment. Heed His voice now, and relinquish your desires - your joy will then last forever.*

#### **Vs. 6 & 7:**

Herod had organized a great feast to celebrate his birthday. Likely, food, wine, music and singing abounded. The daughter of Herodias and Philip performed a lewd dance before Herod (the Bible does not mention her name but historians and Church forefathers believe her name was Salome). Herod was so enthralled by her dance, that he promised her any reward she chose - up to half his kingdom. Possibly, the wine influenced him to the extent that "***he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.***"

+ *Never permit your desires to control you, causing loss of your sound mental reasoning and irrational behavior. Yielding to your desires could lead to animalistic tendencies, and impulsive conduct, defiling your life.*

#### **V. 8:**

Herodias had convinced her daughter that it was necessary to eliminate John the Baptist, since he posed an impediment to her remaining in the position of queen, by being Herod's wife. The consequence of not being queen would have been loss of all the grandeur and wealth associated with that position. Likely, Herodias prompted her daughter to perform that lewd dance before Herod - since after the dance, she did not hesitate in asking Herod for John the Baptist's head on a platter. Thus, Herodias' position as queen was secured, and the kingdom - not half thereof - would be hers.

#### **V. 9:**

Upon hearing her request, Herod awoke from his stupor and was greatly grieved. His grief was promulgated either by his fear and respect of John, or his fear of the people's repercussions, since they loved John. His pride, though, prevented him from reneging on his oath - it would have been better for him to humble himself and deny her request.

His lustful disposition, though, prevented him from rejecting Herodias' daughter's request. He thus had John beheaded, and his head was brought on a platter.

+ *Sin ensnares you into embarrassments - but repentance purifies you, leading you into uprightness and peace of mind.*

**Vs. 10 & 11:**

They beheaded John, and brought his head to the king who, in turn, handed it to Herodias' daughter. The daughter gave it to her mother. The evil woman's intent was thus realized. However, the voice of truth continues to rebuke her until this day, and will rebuke her forever in hell.

**V. 12:**

*"His disciples"* - This refers to John's disciples.

*"Went and told Jesus"* - That was because their teacher, John, had encouraged them to follow Christ, and to resort to Him for all their needs. Their intent could have also been to warn Christ about Herod's wickedness. John's disciples mourned and grieved his death; they took his corpse, buried it with much veneration, and advised Christ.

The life of the angel who had paved the way for Christ thus ended.

Throughout his life he had proclaimed the voice of truth to everyone around him.

***(II) Feeding the multitude with five loaves and two fish (vs. 13 - 21)***

*"When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities. And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick. When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." He said, "Bring them here to Me." Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes. So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained. Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children." (Matthew 14:13 - 21)*

**V. 13:**

*"When Jesus heard it"* - This refers to Jesus hearing the news about John's death, and about Herod saying that Jesus was John resurrected.

*"By a boat"* - Christ boarded a boat from Capernaum to the eastern shore

of Lake Tiberias.

**"A deserted place"** - This refers to a valley adjacent to Bethsaida, which lies to the east of Lake Tiberias.

**"By Himself"** - At that time, He had dispatched His disciples to evangelize in the villages of Judea (Mark 6:30 & 31); they met with Him after He had come off the boat.

**"When the multitudes heard it"** - They had found out that He had boarded a boat heading eastwards in Lake Tiberias.

**"They followed Him on foot"** - It would seem that there was a light breeze - so they were able to catch up with Him after His arrival at the eastern part of Lake Tiberias.

Rather than resist Herod's wickedness, Christ departed to the wilderness, since He had a much more significant goal, namely, fulfillment of mankind's redemption. Christ went to **"a deserted place by Himself,"** in order to teach us the importance of seclusion and tranquility in the life of God's children; it is an opportunity for spiritual gratification and self-examination, as a springboard for service and doing good. The multitudes followed Christ on foot, since they had grown to love Him for His profound teachings, abundant miracles and compassion for all.

#### **V. 14:**

**"When Jesus went out"** - This means that He went out of the boat and met with His disciples.

**"A great multitude"** - Those were the multitudes that had come from the Galilean towns and villages.

**"He was moved with compassion for them"** - He had compassion for them for their ignorance of the path to salvation, and their preoccupation with their material needs, such as healing their afflictions. But they were open to His teaching.

Christ received the multitudes with love. He healed their ailments and preached to them as was His wont. That was to prepare them to eat the bread of blessing. Analogously, we prepare ourselves through repentance and confession, hence, healing our spiritual ailments, prior to partaking of the holy sacraments.

Christ's care for the sick lasted for a very long time - since the multitudes numbered in the thousands. Evening had approached (there were about five thousand men).

#### **V. 15:**

**"When it was evening"** - The Jews considered "two evenings" in each day. The first "evening" was that period when the sun was verging towards

setting. The second "evening" refers to the moment of sunset - this is the one mentioned in Verse 23 below.

The disciples had pity on the multitude, and they assumed that their Teacher was unaware that night was fast approaching, especially given that they had not eaten since that morning. They were in a barren place away from any town or village, with no food readily available. They had completely forgotten that Christ was with them - He satisfies everyone's needs, He had performed countless miracles - how could He possibly have difficulty feeding them??

#### **V. 16:**

The miracle of feeding the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. It manifests Christ's blessings which cover all our needs; therefore, we rely on Him and remain unperturbed by the world's disturbances.

Christ responded to His disciples by asking them to feed the crowds, and to assume responsibility for them; He did that to test their faith: *Would they believe in His power by resorting to Him, or would they yield to human reasoning that indeed there was no food??*

#### **V. 17:**

*"We have here only five loaves and two fish"* - The disciples searched the crowds and found only *"five loaves and two fish."* Likely, most people had not anticipated being away from home for a long time. Nevertheless, Christ's words and miracles won their hearts, and they stayed with Him till the end of the day.

*"Five loaves"* - St. John tells us, in John 6:9, that the disciples had told Christ *"There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish....."* Although that was meagre food for the poor, it would abound and feed all, through Christ's blessing.

When Christ asked the disciples to feed the crowd, they never thought of resorting to Him to satiate the multitudes, rather, they searched among the people and could only find five loaves and two fish. They apprised Christ of their inability to satisfy His request, and gave Him the food they had found. It could be surmised that the five loaves symbolize Moses' pentateuch, or the Jewish five sacrifices, or man's five senses - hence, man's limited, weak, capabilities. It could also be surmised that the two fish symbolize teachings of the Old and New Testaments.

#### **V. 18:**

Christ did not belittle such paltry capabilities - He asked that they be brought to Him to bless.

+ *Regardless of the extent of weakness or insufficiency of your spiritual struggle, God keenly expects it to bless it with His grace, and satiate your entire life.*

**V. 19:**

**"On the grass"** - Grass filled the valley wherein they sat, since it was used as pasture for herds, rather than for cultivation.

**"He blessed and broke"** - Each loaf could have been large and dry - He broke to reduce leftovers after the meal.

The "blessing" could have been in the form of one of several possibilities: the return of the broken pieces to their original size and shape, then He would break again, etc.....or, He may have found more fish and loaves in the bag each time He reached inside it, or, He simply created more fish and bread.....Regardless of the manner in which the blessing materialized, the significance of the miracle is that each person was satiated and there were leftovers.

Christ blessed the food after having seated the crowds calmly. He raised His eyes towards heaven, to teach them to pray before eating, seeking God's blessing.

Christ subsequently gave His disciples the food to distribute to the crowds, in an orderly fashion as St. Mark stated: **"So they sat down in ranks, in hundreds and in fifties."** (Mark 6:40) The disciples were the New Testament priests, tasked with the multitudes' shepherding and satiation. Let no one forget: organization guarantees sufficient food for everyone.

**V. 20:**

The blessing was significant. Not only were the multitudes filled, but there were also leftovers. God always gives generously.

Christ ordered that the fragments be collected, out of respect for God's grace, and to accentuate the miracle's greatness. The fragments filled twelve baskets, which was the number of disciples.

Carrying away twelve baskets filled with fragments was tangible proof that what they had just experienced was neither a dream nor mere feelings on the part of the multitudes. Likely, they distributed those fragments to the poor in nearby villages.

**V. 21:**

The number of women and children was not mentioned, not because they were unimportant, rather, because the man represented the household, since he was considered to be its head.

As mentioned earlier, it could be surmised that the number "five" symbolizes Moses' pentateuch. We can also speculate that the number "thousand" symbolizes heaven, and the fact that God's heavenly blessings cover all His children.

***(III) Christ walks on water (vs. 22 - 33)***

***"Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God.""*** (Matthew 14:22 - 33)

**V. 22:**

***"Jesus made His disciples get into the boat"*** - This could have been because He had pity on them after a full day's toil, or, because they had felt, along with the multitudes, that He was the awaited Messiah of Whom Moses spoke - Moses fed the Israelites with manna from heaven and, behold, Christ satiated them through the blessed five loaves and two fish. For this reason, the multitudes wanted to make Him King over them to deliver them from the Romans. The disciples, due to their love for Him, would have been the first candidates to side with that mode of thinking - therefore He made them leave.

***"Go before Him to the other side"*** - He wanted them to proceed from the east side of Lake Tiberias to the town of Capernaum.

After the miracle of feeding the multitudes, the crowds continued to gather around Him to receive His blessings, ask Him questions, and ask Him to cure their sick.

The disciples tried to help Him in organizing the crowds. However, He dismissed them, so that they may precede Him to the other side of Lake Tiberias. Upon attempting to remain with Him, He made them leave, for two spiritual reasons:

1. He wanted some solitary time on the mountain.
2. He wanted them to face life's trials and feel their weaknesses, so that He may deliver them through His power, and edify their faith.

**V. 23:**

**"He sent the multitudes away"** - This lasted a long time, since they were attached to Him. Also, curing their sicknesses consumed much time.

**"The mountain"** - Christ went up the mountain to be away from the crowds - that was beside the valley where they had assembled. Whoever seeks seclusion in order to pray, must try to distance himself from frequent conversations and meetings; This was practiced by some saints such as the Great St. Anthony.

**"Evening"** - This refers to the time of sunset.

After having blessed and dismissed the multitudes, Christ went up the mountain for seclusion. Once again, He emphasizes the importance of seclusion and tranquility in our life. This is especially true before undertaking important tasks or services.

**V. 24:**

The disciples boarded the boat at sunset, then night overtook them. After a short while, a contrary wind started blowing, and hindered the boat's passage - it was buffeted by the waves and was on the verge of sinking. Despite the disciples' experience at sea, they were unable to control the boat.

**V. 25:**

The disciples continued to experience difficulty almost until dawn. The fourth watch refers to a few hours before sunrise or, about, four o'clock in the morning.

**V. 26:**

Before giving up hope, Christ appeared to them walking on the water. They were afraid, thinking they had seen a ghost.

Here, by breaking nature's laws and walking on water, Christ manifested His authority over nature for the second time; the first time was when He silenced the storm: **"Then He arose and rebuked the wind and the sea, and there was a great calm."** (Matthew 8:26)

+ *You could also be experiencing a stormy sea, namely, the world. By*

*believing on, and adhering to, Christ, and by refraining from yielding to your lusts, and by repenting, you will rise above the storm.*

**V. 27:**

Christ comforted them saying, *"I am Christ your Teacher."* Their fear abated upon recognizing His voice.

**Vs. 28 & 29:**

*"Lord, if it is You"* - This is not an indication of doubt - since Peter would not have risked death if he had doubted that it was indeed Christ. What he meant was, *"Since You are Christ, grant me the grace of walking on water."* Peter believed on Christ Who was walking on water. Acting impulsively through his love, he wanted to hurry to Christ. He therefore asked Christ to let him walk on water so that he may join Him. In his heart, he believed that Christ was capable of doing this. Christ commanded him saying, *"Come."* Peter therefore walked on water, happy to be able to walk towards Christ. Christ did not calm the waves, rather, He enabled Peter to walk over them.  
+ *Do not expect Christ to lift your hardship, because it is more important that He grant you peace and serenity so that, rather than be perturbed by your trials, you walk over them.*

**Vs. 30 & 31:**

Peter focused on Christ and walked in faith over the waves. However, when he changed his focus and looked at the waves, their violence scared him, and he doubted his ability to continue walking on water. Thus, he started sinking, and cried out to Christ for help. *"And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"*

**Vs. 32 & 33:**

The disciples' faith in Christ was edified, upon seeing His authority over nature by walking on water, His enabling Peter to walk on water, and the storm's sudden calming upon Christ's entering the boat. Thus, they proclaimed their faith, worshipped Him, and glorified Him.

*(IV) Christ heals afflictions (vs. 34 - 36)*

*"When they had crossed over, they came to the land of Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to Him all who were sick, and begged Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well."*

(Matthew 14:34 - 36)

***"The land of Gennesaret"*** - The boat arrived at Bethsaida. Subsequently they passed through the valley of Gennesaret on their way to Capernaum, which lay towards the north-west.

***"The men of that place recognized Him"*** - He was well-known to them because of their familiarity with His teachings and miracles.

***"They might only touch"*** - Christ could have cured them by saying a word. But He allowed them to touch Him, to proclaim their faith in Him practically. Our constant struggle and quest for Christ is necessary for acquiring salvation.

Upon arriving in the boat to the other shore, in the land of Gennesaret - a fertile valley - the locals recognized Him. Overjoyed, they hastened to bring to Him their sick, so that ***"they might only touch the hem of His garment."*** He healed them all.

Disease was introduced to humanity through Adam's fall and expulsion from Paradise. Now, Christ came to liberate humanity from sin and death, and to lift from it all pain and disease.

If we assume that Christ's garment, closely wrapped around Him, represents His Church, then the hem of His garment would be the last place in Church; by entering through it we receive cure and salvation.

*+ You will receive great grace, by believing on blessing. This may be through touching the sanctuary's veil, or touching the saints' relics. That would constitute our proclamation of our faith in Christ and His saints. May this be an opportunity to chase away all evil and start, through this blessing, a new, active life, in God's love.*

## Chapter 15

### The elders' tradition - Christ heals the Canaanite woman's daughter - feeding the multitude with seven loaves

#### **(I) The elders' tradition (vs. 1 - 9)**

*"Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, 'Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.' He answered and said to them, 'Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God''-- then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' "*  
(Matthew 15:1 - 9)

#### **Vs. 1 & 2:**

The elders taught what they had inherited, namely, those teachings which had been passed down by fathers to Jewish children. Those teachings interpreted the Holy Scriptures, and all rites pertaining to worship. Such practice is both proper and necessary. St. Paul learned, through those teachings, the names of the two sorcerers Jannes and Jambres who had resisted Moses (2 Timothy 3:8), and St. Jude learned about the dispute between the Archangel Michael and Satan concerning the body of Moses (Jude 1:9).

Thus, tradition is quite important, and adherence to it was emphasized by the apostles in the New Testament. However, some Jewish elders had added strange teachings, which conformed neither to tradition nor to God's commandments; those included the necessity of washing hands before meals. The scribes therefore rebuked the disciples for failing to follow this "tradition." Having heard of Christ's fame, those scribes and Pharisees had journeyed all the way from Jerusalem, not purposing to learn from Him, rather, to accuse Him and attribute to Him wrongdoings.

The "tradition" which the elders had mentioned, was in fact a worthless addition; because the washing of hands mentioned in the holy scriptures was in the completely different context of purification from certain sins (Leviticus 12:15).

#### **V. 3:**

Our Lord Christ clarified the fact that the elders' traditions had sustained wrong additions - some of which even contradicted God's commandments.

### **Vs. 4 & 5:**

The commandment stipulates honouring one's father and mother (Exodus 20:12). Furthermore, the law imposes the death penalty on whoever despises or abuses one of his parents (Exodus 21:17). Nevertheless, a strange tradition was appended by the Jewish elders, namely, a person may be absolved from honouring his parents by making an offering to the temple. This contradicts the spirit of the commandment, since, how can a son possibly ignore the needs of his parents, and feel that it suffices to please God by a mere offering?!

### **V. 6:**

It would be concluded from the preceding that not all Jewish traditions were sound - this is what the Bible labels, in Isaiah 29:13, as "***the commandment of men.***" On the other hand, sound tradition is very good indeed.

+ *Do not interpret the holy Bible according to your own opinion and intent. Rather, adhere to the teachings of the Church, and of the early Church's holy fathers. Submit to the interpretation of the ecumenical Church - then you will understand the correct meanings. Rather than being preoccupied with philosophical arguments to prove your point, focus on applying the commandments.*

### **Vs. 7 - 9:**

***"Hypocrites!"*** - That was because they did not show what was in their hearts. They adhered strictly to the letter of God's law but, in reality, they sought to satisfy their own desires, namely, offering money to the temple for their benefit, while ignoring merciful deeds, even to parents. Clearly, this contradicted God's commandments.

Isaiah accentuated this strange tendency of the scribes and Pharisees in Isaiah 29:13, namely, adherence to "apparent worship," while the heart is distant from God. Any addition to God's words constitutes "***the commandment of men***" and is not God's commandment.

Sound tradition consists of verbal instructions which God gave to Moses or the prophets, or which Christ gave to the disciples.

### **(II) *Eating with unwashed hands (vs. 10 - 20)***

***"When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." Then His disciples came and said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch." Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness,***

*blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.*" (Matthew 15:10 - 20)

**Vs. 10 & 11:**

*"When He had called the multitude"* - Christ's discussion with the scribes and Pharisees could have been unheard by the crowd. Another likelihood, was that, in any case, He addressed the multitude in order to teach them the spiritual facts; Christ always spoke the truth, boldly and consistently, unintimidated by evil-doers' resistance.

*"Hear and understand"* - Heed, and pay attention to, what I am saying.

Christ wanted to draw the multitudes into profound understanding - which was contrary to the Pharisees' superficial approach, namely, washing hands before eating. It was more important to care for whatever emerges from the depths of a person, reflected in his speech - if evil, that would defile him.

Contrary to claims by those who oppose fasting, there is no connection here between fasting, and what Christ said. That was purely a discussion about washing hands before meals. On the other hand, Christ emphasized the importance of fasting clearly on several occasions, such as His sermon on the mount (Matthew 6:16 - 18).

**V. 12:**

*"Then"* - Having dismissed the multitude, the scribes and the Pharisees, Christ entered a house with His disciples, and had that discussion (Mark 7:17).

*"Offended"* - They were quite angered because Christ had labelled them as *"hypocrites,"* since their teachings were men's, rather than God's, commandments. Christ was referring to the fifth of the Ten Commandments - concerning honouring one's parents.

The disciples alerted their Teacher to the Pharisees' being upset at His words - since He had exposed their hypocrisy and their adherence to men's, rather than God's, teachings, while attributing them to the elders' traditions.

**V.13:**

Christ clarified to them that, in order for us to be branches in God's hands for planting in His Church, it is imperative to submit to His words, and to refrain from hypocrisy. A plant that is not planted by God, will be cast into the fire, regardless of its beauty - since it will constitute tares rather than wheat. Treatment of the hypocritic Pharisees follows that example.

**V. 14:**

Christ told His disciples, *"Let them alone."* He meant, *"Ignore them as well as their teaching,"* since they may repent if the multitudes forsook them.

Christ also declared that they were blind to the truth, worshipping their honour, and leading their Jewish followers by misleading instruction. They were also blind to the Pharisees' misleading teaching - when a blind man leads another, they both fall into the pit of perdition. Put differently, Christ warned His disciples to stay away from the Pharisees and their misleading instruction, lest they should be affected by them and stray away from the truth.

+ *Remain unperturbed, when the wicked are upset by your words and conduct. Rather, stay away from them to avoid being influenced by their company. Pray for them.*

### **Vs. 15 - 17:**

***"Then Peter answered and said to Him"*** - Peter's response and question to Christ were also on behalf of the rest of the disciples, since he said, ***"Explain this parable to us."*** Christ subsequently addressed them all.

***"This parable"*** refers to Christ's statement in verse 11, which Peter labelled ***"parable"*** because it conveyed meanings requiring clarification.

The disciples, including Peter - the most impulsive - asked Christ about what He had said to the multitude. Christ marvelled at their lack of understanding - having interpreted several parables to them on previous occasions. Nevertheless, He explained it to them with fatherly tenderness. He said that various foods entering the body are transformed into nutrition, and the body eliminates the waste. Such material food has no effect on the soul, and does not defile a person, since whatever is harmful or useless is eliminated.

### **Vs. 18 - 20:**

A person is characterized by, and is accountable for, what originates in the heart and proceeds through the lips. A person is not characterized by, and is not accountable for, whatever is eaten.

Christ subsequently gave examples of sins, starting with evil thoughts, given that evil acts such as murder, adultery and theft, are initiated by evil thoughts.

***"Fornication"*** refers to sexual promiscuity. ***"Blasphemy"*** refers to profanity against God or anything sacred.

+ *Pay attention to the purity of your speech and conduct. Repent whenever you err. Self-examination is much more important than your outward appearance.*

### **(III) Christ heals the Canaanite woman's daughter (vs. 21 - 28)**

***"Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to***

*the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour." (Matthew 15:21 - 28)*

**V. 21:**

Christ departed from the Gennesaret region, likely, either to avoid unprofitable discussions with the Pharisees, or to distance Himself somewhat from the crowds while, at the same time, demonstrating His love for the Gentles, who abounded in Tyre and Sidon - since He came for the salvation of the entire world.

*"Tyre and Sidon"* - Those were two cities on the Mediterranean, west of Galilee, in what is today's Lebanon.

**V. 22:**

*"Have mercy on me"* - That was because her daughter's ailment was very painful for her.

*"O Lord, Son of David"* - The Jews believed that the Messiah was the Son of David. Therefore when they saw Christ's power and miracles, they said that He was the Son of David. When the Gentile woman heard of Christ, she called Him by the title the Jews used.

As Christ passed by Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile woman - from Canaan, the son of Ham, the son of Noah - approached Him. The Canaanites had initially inhabited the Promised Land, prior to the Jews' advent with Joshua.

Her daughter was demon-possessed (Mark 7:25). She had heard of Christ's healing power. She went to Him, asking Him to cure her daughter.

**V. 23:**

Christ ignored her and continued on His way. However, she continued to plead with Him to cure her daughter. Even the disciples pitied her, and asked Him to respond to her.

That was precisely what Christ wanted - that the disciples' hearts be moved. They would then sense the responsibility of salvation for the entire world - not merely the Jews.

**V. 24:**

Contrary to the disciples' request, Christ's response proclaimed what the Jews had surmised, and what He had initially started, namely, He had come for the salvation of Jews who believed in God. In fact, He had come for the Jews first, and subsequently He included all Gentiles; this is evinced by His passing through that region and performing the miracle.

This approach - preaching to the Jews first - was quite suitable, since they had assumed that salvation was for the Jews only. Had Christ started His mission by saying that salvation was for the whole world, the Jews would have rejected Him outright. However, having

convinced them that His salvation was spiritual, rather than material deliverance from the Romans, He demonstrated that salvation was available to all believers indiscriminately - Jews and Gentiles alike.

**V. 25:**

The woman believed that He was the awaited Messiah the Son of David, and that He was the Saviour of the world. She worshipped Him, proclaiming her belief on, and submission to, Him. She asked Him to help her and heal her daughter.

**V. 26:**

Christ pretended to reject her plea - in order to reveal her faith and humility. Therefore He told her that He had come for the Jews' salvation, since they were God's children because of their faith; He said that it was not befitting to take God's grace, meant for the children, and cast it to the Gentiles, whom the Jews considered as dogs.

**V. 27:**

The woman's amazing humility was revealed. She told Christ that even dogs ate the crumbs falling off their master's table - thus, she acknowledged that she was among the dogs, yet she needed His grace. This showed the extent of her faith, and her perseverance in prayer.

**V. 28:**

Finally, Christ showed His love and care for the Gentiles, represented by that woman. The intent of the previous dialogue was to reveal the extent of her faith, her prayers and faith, and her adherence to Him. He proclaimed to the multitudes the greatness of her faith, and granted cure for her daughter - her daughter was healed instantly.

+ *Persevere in your prayers - regardless of the delay in the Divine response. You will thus acquire new virtues - such as humility. God will even exalt you in heaven before the celestials.*

**(IV) Christ heals the multitude (vs. 29 - 31)**

*"Jesus departed from there, skirted the Sea of Galilee, and went up on the mountain and sat down there. Then great multitudes came to Him, having with them the lame, blind, mute, maimed, and many others; and they laid them down at Jesus' feet, and He healed them. So the multitude marveled when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel."* (Matthew 15:29 - 31)

**V. 29:**

Our Lord Christ returned from the Tyre and Sidon region, by the Mediterranean, to the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias). He went up the mountain - likely to rest. However, the multitudes followed Him, seeking adherence to Him - they were thus not merely wayside wanderers; He cared for them. The mountain could symbolize transcending above earthly matters.

**Vs. 30 & 31:**

*"The God of Israel"* - It would seem that the multitudes were predominantly Gentiles; when our Lord healed them, *"they glorified the God of Israel"* since they knew that Christ was Jewish.

The multitudes proclaimed their need for Christ - thus, they brought him all their ailing loved ones, and He tenderly healed them. *"The multitudes marvelled"* at His Divine authority to heal all afflictions.

The multitudes glorified God at Christ's clear Divine authority to cure everyone whose sins had impeded his faculties of speech, sight or movement.

+ *God is ready to heal all your afflictions, and solve all your problems - especially spiritual ones. However, you must resort to Him with much humility and prayers, casting all your needs before Him, and confident that His love is capable of realizing everything for you.*

**(V) Christ feeds the multitude with seven loaves (vs. 32 - 39)**

*"Now Jesus called His disciples to Himself and said, 'I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And I do not want to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.' Then His disciples said to Him, 'Where could we get enough bread in the wilderness to fill such a great multitude?' Jesus said to them, 'How many loaves do you have?' And they said, 'Seven, and a few little fish.' So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and the fish and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitude. So they all ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets full of the fragments that were left. Now those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. And He sent away the multitude, got into the boat, and came to the region of Magdala." (Matthew 15:32 - 39)*

**Vs. 32 & 33:**

Our Lord Christ continued caring for the multitudes - hence, answering their questions, curing their illnesses, and teaching them.

Time in His company passed quickly - and three days had elapsed, without their asking for food, being preoccupied with His words and miracles. Likely, the food supplies they had brought with them had run out after a day or two - since no one had anticipated spending three days with Him - His words captivated them.

It is important to note that Christ cared for their physical needs, and He discussed this with His disciples, to test their faith - especially after having seen Him feeding the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. Unfortunately they reasoned with their minds, rather than their faith. They declared their inability to provide food for the multitudes in that barren place - especially as most of the disciples were poor.

+ *Care for your spiritual needs, and cast your cares upon the Lord. Rest assured that He will provide you with material needs you have difficulty in providing.*

**V. 34:**

Christ asked His disciples to seek food among the multitudes. All they could find was seven loaves and some small fish.

**Vs. 35 & 36:**

Christ instructed His disciples to organize the crowds, and seat them, to facilitate food distribution, and to witness calmly the miracle's splendour. Strangely enough, they believed that they would eat, despite the paucity of the food available: seven loaves and some small fish. Faith, though, transcends all human reasoning, and affects our conduct.

Christ took the loaves and fish, and gave thanks, as He had done in the earlier miracle; this was to teach us to pray before eating. He blessed with His Divine hand, broke, and gave the disciples to distribute to the crowds seated on the ground. The disciples are the New Testament priests, responsible for distributing God's gifts to all believers.

**Vs. 37 - 39:**

Everyone ate. There were about four thousand men plus women and children. It is interesting to note that the number "four" is also the number of the four cardinal points of the globe (north, south, east and west.) Christ's blessing thus covers the whole world, elevating it to heaven.

When the entire multitude was satiated, the disciples gathered the leftover fragments, filling seven baskets. The result of the Holy Spirit's work is thus abundant - and overflows beyond everyone's needs.

After having blessed and dismissed the multitudes, Christ boarded the boat in the Sea of Galilee, and departed to the region of Magdala.



## Chapter 16

### The Pharisees' persecution - carrying the cross

**(I) The Pharisees seek a sign (vs. 1 - 4)**

*"Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, 'When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed."* (Matthew 16:1 - 4)

**V. 1:**

The Pharisees were at variance with the Sadducees. However, seeing that the multitudes had abandoned them and followed Christ, they joined the Sadducees in trying to test Christ, reveal His weakness, and induce the multitude to abandon Him; therefore, they asked Christ to perform a significant miracle - something plain to see or something descending from heaven, to prove that He was really the awaited Messiah, although He had already performed many miracles before the multitudes. However, their pride and jealousy were so great, that they continued to disbelieve and reject Him. They thought that by asking for a significant miracle from heaven, they would reveal His inability to perform it, then the multitudes would abandon Him.

**Vs. 2 & 3:**

*"Evening"* - *"The sky is red"* - These expressions refer to the sky's overall color at sunset - a red sky at sunset usually hails good weather the following day.

*"Red and threatening"* - At sunrise, a red sky due to light dispersion by clouds, is a sign of approaching rain or bad weather.

*"The face of the sky"* - This refers to signs from which weather conditions are deduced.

*"The signs of the times"* - This expression refers to prophecies foretelling Christ's advent, the advent of John the Baptist the forerunner, and all the powerful miracles, never witnessed previously in Israel, which confirmed that Christ was the awaited Messiah.

Christ did not grant them a miracle as they had requested, because He came to save them from sin - not to display His prowess. He responded to His

tempters that since they were capable of using the brains, which God granted them, to discern weather conditions, they should, more importantly, understand the prophecies which spoke of His coming!! That was their primary task as religious leaders of the Jews - then they would believe on Him, and others would follow.

#### **V. 4:**

Our Lord Christ clarified their lack of comprehension, attributing it to their envy and evil hearts. By abandoning God and clinging to their selfishness, they became - spiritually - adulterers and fornicators. Put differently, they worshipped their pride as opposed to God. Consequently, Christ called on them to repent; He told them that, rather than seeking a sign from heaven, they should recall the story of Jonah the prophet and the Ninevites, follow their example, and repent like them, thereby facilitating their belief on Him. Christ subsequently left them, feeling sorry for them, and preferring not to waste time with them in unbeneficial debates.

*+ Do not be overly preoccupied with material petitions from God. Be aware that your primary need is repentance, leading to purity. Rest assured that by focusing on repentance, God will manage all your material needs.*

#### **(II) The Pharisees' leaven (vs. 5 - 12)**

*"Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have taken no bread." But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, "O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?-- but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Matthew 16:5 - 12)*

#### **V. 5:**

The disciples boarded the boat and crossed over from Magdala, on the west coast of the Sea of Galilee, to the east shore. They were so absorbed in the service that they had completely neglected their physical needs - hence, they forgot to take food for the trip.

+ *A servant, or a spiritual person, may forget his/her physical needs, but God manages them.*

**Vs. 6 & 7:**

Away from the multitude, Christ warned His disciples against the leaven of the Pharsees - meaning their hypocrisy. This is because the Pharisees' meticulous teaching of religious details was solely for the sake of being honored by the people - not for love of God.

Leaven resembles hypocrisy, since it infiltrates the dough, without anyone noticing. Similarly, through his cunning, a hypocrite appears to be righteous, while his heart is distant from God.

The disciples, though, thought that Christ was talking about material leaven used for making bread; in other words, they thought He was reproaching them for having forgotten to bring along food for the trip.

**Vs. 8 - 11:**

Christ's words revealed a sin within the disciples' hearts, namely, being preoccupied with material needs - hence, they were confused for having forgotten to bring food with them. Christ rebuked them, reminding them of His miracles of feeding the multitudes with five or seven loaves, how everyone was satiated, and how twelve or seven baskets of leftovers were gathered. Thus, they should have relied on Him, confident in His ability to satisfy their physical needs, while focusing solely on the service.

**V. 12:**

The disciples finally understood Christ's intent. He was warning them against the Pharisees' teachings, rife with hypocrisy. Put differently, He was calling for purity of their hearts, as well as love of God and fellow humans.

+ *Do not exult in your ability to achieve your purpose by feigning what is contrary to your belief. This leads to your having a dual personality. Eventually, people will mistrust you. Rather, apply throughout your life your sincere beliefs. Liberating yourself from hypocrisy necessitates repentance and ridding yourself of any inherent evil.*

**(III) Believing on Christ (vs. 13 - 20)**

*"When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ,*

*the Son of the living God." 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. 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. 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." Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ." (Matthew 16:13 - 20)*

**Vs. 13 & 14:**

Our Lord Christ directed His disciples towards knowing Him, and believing on His Divinity. Thus, He asked them, Whom the people thought He was. The disciples responded saying that there were many viewpoints. The belief of some was like Herod's, namely, that Christ was John the Baptist resurrected. Others thought that, whereas Elijah ascended to heaven in the flesh, he had returned to earth, since the Jews had been expecting Elijah prior to the Messiah's advent, according to Malachi's prophecy (Malachi 4:5 & 6). Others thought that Christ was in fact Jeremiah the prophet. Finally, some thought that Christ was one of the antecedent prophets, due to similarities between Christ's call to repentance, in preparation for eternal life, and theirs. No one was able to understand anything about Christ's Divinity.

**Vs. 15 & 16:**

Christ then proceeded to the important question, namely, the disciples' belief towards Him. Responding on behalf of the disciples, Peter proclaimed that they believed He was the awaited Messiah, the Son of God - hence, the incarnate God.

**V. 17:**

*"Flesh and blood"* - This means "any human being."

*"My Father Who is in heaven"* - This is a heavenly manifestation through Divine power - because belief on the incarnate Christ transcends all human intellect. Our Lord Christ praised Peter's declared faith which, clearly, was through God's grace, rather than human logic. The mystery of incarnation surpasses any understanding: How can God, through His love and humility, condescend to be united with our humanity?!

**V. 18:**

Our Lord Christ confirmed the importance of that proclaimed faith, since the

Church is founded on the rock of faith. Thus, Christ established membership in the Church, namely, by believing that Jesus Christ is God. Christ also proclaimed that neither Satan nor Hades has authority over the Church, since the Church's children - all believers - will be transported, after this life, to Paradise and the kingdom of heaven.

Christ did not say "You are the rock," rather, He said "*You are Peter,*" to emphasize that "*this rock*" is "the rock of faith" - not Peter - on which the Church is founded.

#### **V. 19:**

*"The keys"* - Our Lord Christ likened the Church unto a locked-up treasure. He handed the keys to the apostles and their successors - the bishops and priests - to grant, from God, absolution to penitents and, to non repentants, retention of sins and deprivation from the holy sacraments.

*"The kingdom of heaven"* - This refers to the Church, where God reigns over the hearts of His children, the believers; this Church extends forever. Christ's proclamation of the Church, in which the Holy Spirit is active, implicitly established the Sacrament of Penance, through which authority is given to the apostles to absolve and retain sins. Thus, they retain the sins of those persisting in their sins, depriving them of participating in communion, and absolve those who repent and confess, administering to them the holy sacraments.

Christ granted this authority to Peter, representing the New Testament priesthood. Put differently, this authority was given to all the apostles and their successors - bishops and priests. The same authority is repeated in Chapter 18:18.

This constitutes the first clear proclamation of the establishment of the Sacrament of Penance, one of the Church's seven sacraments. Its early proclamation accentuates its importance, since repentance is the key to a spiritual lifestyle.

#### **V. 20:**

Following His clear proclamation of His Divinity, Christ charged His disciples not to discuss that issue with the multitudes, lest they should invoke the Pharisees' and religious leaders' envy, thus impeding the people's belief. Following fulfillment of redemption on the Cross, and proclamation of His resurrection, that discussion would edify their faith.

*+ Your faith in Christ obviates any perturbation from worldly upheavals - rather, you rejoice in fellowshiping with Him, and you prime yourself for permanent existence with Him in His heavenly kingdom. This will also motivate you to serve Him, in order to attract stray souls to His kingdom.*

**(IV) The necessity of carrying the cross (vs. 21 - 28)**

*"From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."* (Matthew 16:21 - 28)

**V. 21:**

*"The elders"* - Those were the Jews' leaders, members of their high council, the Sanhedrin (see Chapter 5:21 & 22).

*"Chief priests"* - Those included the current high priest, the preceding ones, and the clerical division leaders.

*"Scribes"* - Those were the transcribers and teachers of the law.

Having proclaimed His Divinity to His disciples and established His everlasting Church, it was necessary for Christ to proclaim the price of establishing that Church, namely, shedding His blood on the Cross. He therefore clarified to His disciples that it would be necessary for Him to suffer at the hands of the chief priests and elders, and that would eventually lead to His death for humanity's redemption, but He would rise on the third day thereafter. Therefore, having known His Divinity, they could understand His resurrection, and would not be perturbed by His Passion.

**Vs. 22 & 23:**

*"Then Peter took Him aside"* - Peter thought that Christ's words about His suffering were merely a spontaneous reaction on His part to the Jews' significant opposition to Him. Peter therefore was attempting to dissuade Christ from speaking in that fashion, lest the other disciples should feel depressed.

*"Began to rebuke Him"* - He tried to stop Him from continuing to talk in that way.

*"Far be it from You Lord"* - Peter believed on Christ's Divinity - but neither he, nor the rest of the disciples, had appreciated the meaning of redemption. Thus, Peter felt that suffering was inconsistent with Christ's power.

*"Satan"* - Christ said this because Peter's words were satanic, since he was thinking of an earthly, not a heavenly, kingdom.

*"You are an offence to Me"* - Christ was telling Peter that he was trying to impede humanity's redemption.

*"The things of men"* - This refers to an earthly kingdom, which is not God's thought, namely, humanity's redemption.

The disciples were distressed at what Christ would endure, since that negated the notion of an earthly kingdom, which they had thought, along with the rest of the Jews. Peter tried impulsively to prevent Christ from giving Himself up to the chief priests in Jerusalem.

On the other hand, Christ rebuked Peter for attempting to impede humanity's redemption, by insisting on an earthly kingdom, neglecting the more important heavenly kingdom.

#### **Vs. 24 & 25:**

Christ specified two conditions for someone to follow Him and become a member of His Church:

1. Denying oneself - hence, being humble.
2. Carrying the cross - hence, enduring suffering for the sake of adhering to the faith and to God's commandments.

The way may have seemed difficult, so Christ stated that in order to deliver the soul from the world's sins, the soul must be dead to all evil, inherent, desires. Thus, whoever kills his soul, meaning whoever carries the cross for Christ's sake, will deliver his soul from perdition through the world's evil, and will secure a place for it in the kingdom.

#### **V. 26:**

On the other hand, by indulging in all the world's pleasures and lusts, a person will lose his eternity and will have thus lost everything, because nothing can be equal to, or make up for, that lost soul - we have only one soul, that is more precious than all the world's acquisitions and pleasures, and that Christ redeemed with His precious blood. No one wants to lose his soul, the most precious thing in existence, for the sake of material, temporal pleasures.

#### **V. 27:**

*"The Son of Man"* - Christ does not hesitate to call Himself the *"Son of Man"* in heaven - as He shared our weak bodies on earth, He will make us

share with Him the heavenly glory, remaining with us as the Firstborn among many siblings.

Here, Christ is alerting them to judgment day, when He will come "*in the glory of His Father with His angels,*" and hold each person accountable for his faith, his love of God, and his deeds.

Therefore, He comforted His followers, saying that compensation awaits them on judgment day, for all their suffering on earth. Conversely, evil-doers who indulged in wickedness will be punished on that day.

**V. 28:**

The coming of the Son of Man in His kingdom could be a reference to Christ's transfiguration on the mount, in the presence of His three disciples Peter, John and James.

It could also refer to the spread of Christianity, and Christ's reign over hearts throughout the world. This has been witnessed by several disciples who had enjoyed long lives, such as St. John the Beloved, who lived almost until the end of the first century.

*+ Be not fascinated by worldly temporal pleasures. Do not worry about the world's problems or the needs of the body. Do not judge everything materialistically like everybody else. Rather, seek your soul's salvation by strengthening your relationship with God and by helping others. Choose merciful deeds over your own comfort. Accept joyfully all trials which God permits. Train yourself, daily, to control your desires, and to use everything measurably, thus channeling your emotions towards the love of God, while preparing yourself for eternity.*

## Chapter 17

### The transfiguration - paying taxes

#### (I) The transfiguration (vs. 1 - 9)

*"Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."'" (Matthew 17:1 - 9)*

#### V. 1:

Six days after informing His disciples about His Passion and death, Christ went up the mountain with three of His close disciples - those whom He had picked to accompany Him when He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, and the three who would accompany Him to Gethsemane prior to His arrest. Those three were sufficiently spiritually mature to understand sublime issues - more so than the others. Although Christ desires to reveal everything to everyone, some are unwilling to understand - those three had demonstrated greater love for Him. The transfiguration was intended to support the disciples, to help alleviate any doubts they might have upon witnessing Christ's crucifixion and death. Christ took with Him three disciples, since *".....by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established."* (Deuteronomy 19:15)

#### V. 2:

Our Lord Christ manifested part of His Divine splendor - as much as His three disciples could endure. The most significant light they knew was the sun's - thus, His face *"shone like the sun."* He is the Sun of righteousness that illuminates our life. His *"clothes became as white as the light"* - clothing being close to the body, could symbolize the Church being enlightened by Christ.

**V. 3:**

Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ: Moses represented the law, and Elijah represented the prophets - this is because Christ fulfilled and confirmed the law and the prophecies. Moses died and appeared in a spiritual body, while Elijah ascended in the flesh, then appeared in the transfiguration. Thus, Christ is God of the living and the dead, since the spirits of the departed are preserved with Him.

Moses and Elijah spoke of the redemption which Christ was resolved to fulfill in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31), that being the goal of the law and the prophets, hence, salvation of the world. Likely, the disciples recognized Moses and Elijah through Christ's discussion with them. The transfiguration underscores the following:

1. Those who had departed, such as Moses, are still alive with God.
2. The spirits in heaven recognize each other.
3. The saints in heaven care for our salvation.

**V. 4:**

The disciples rejoiced upon witnessing this Divine scene, and seeing Moses and Elijah - they longed for that scene's persistence.

With his usual impulsiveness, and expressing his, and the disciples' admiration and joy, Peter proposed erecting three tents one for each of Christ, Moses and Elijah, so that they may remain longer - Peter failed to realize that, being in their spiritual form, they were in no need of tents.

**V. 5:**

During Peter's admiration and full absorption in the magnificent scene, Christ saw they could not endure the splendor of His Divinity any longer - therefore, a cloud, brightly and Divinely illuminated, overshadowed Christ, Moses, Elijah and the three disciples. Through that awesome scene, they heard a Divine proclamation that Christ was the Beloved Son, to Whom all mankind should submit. The Father testified that Christ was the Son of God, the Only Begotten Son.

**V. 6:**

Upon their being overshadowed by the cloud, and rendered unable to see anything or anyone around them, the disciples were terrified - they could not even see each other....Additionally, they heard the Father's awesome voice from heaven; they fell on the ground, thus reflecting their human weakness. Our Savior, though, lifted them up.

**Vs. 7 & 8:**

Our Lord Christ touched and encouraged His disciples. They awoke from their stupor to find that the transfiguration had ended, and that Christ was standing with them, alone, in His familiar human form, to which they were accustomed.

Here, the holy Bible emphasizes our need for One, and only One, Person, namely, Jesus Christ our God and Savior.

**V. 9:**

Christ charged them to wait for His resurrection prior to informing the other disciples or the multitude about the transfiguration. That was because not only would they have been disbelieved, but also it would provoke the scribes and Pharisees against them, claiming that they were liars, circulating, what they considered to be, false information. Even if they were believed by some, that could confirm the earthly kingdom for which they longed - which was against the heavenly kingdom which Christ preached.

On the other hand, after the resurrection, the transfiguration would confirm Christ's Divinity, and they would be reassured further, after the Holy Spirit's descent.

*+ Christ is willing to be transfigured before you, if such is your wish. Indeed, he is transfiguring, but you may fail to note this due to your preoccupation with material issues. He speaks to you through the holy Bible and Church guidance. He even speaks to you through daily events, comments by those around you, or various other means, calling you to repent, to know Him, and to fellowship with Him. The more attentive you are to His calling, the more apparent He becomes to you in simple, yet clear, ways. You will then enjoy fellowshiping with Him.*

**(II) Elijah's coming (vs. 10 - 13)**

*"And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist."* (Matthew 17:10 - 13)

**V. 10:**

It would seem that the transfiguration took place during the night, since Luke 9:28 - 37 states *".....the next day, when they had come down from the*

*mountain...."* During the three disciples' descent with Christ, they asked Him about the scribes' belief that Elijah must come a second time on earth - hence, had that been realized during the transfiguration, or that would be another coming, since Elijah had not died, having ascended to heaven in the flesh....? It should also be noted that Elijah's second coming was mentioned in Malachi 4:4.

**V. 11:**

Christ confirmed that, indeed, Elijah would come a second time. That would occur immediately before judgment day, amidst the abounding evil. He would call people to repent, and to return to the Faith, offering mankind a final chance before judgment.

**Vs. 12 & 13:**

Here, Christ referred to Elijah's spiritual return. Hence, John the Baptist came, possessing the same attributes as Elijah: leading an austere life and having the power to proclaim the truth. The Baptist suffered from the scribes' and Pharisees' resistance - similarly to Christ the Son of man. The Jews had failed to realize that John had come having Elijah's spirit - meaning having Elijah's characteristics.

*"They....did to him whatever they wished"* - This means that they resisted him and were pleased at his murder. Despite Herod's fear of the people, the chief priests' resistance to John encouraged Herod to murder him.

*"The disciples understood"* - The disciples understood only after Christ had explained to them the details of John having prepared the way for Him; then they realized that John had come in Elijah's spirit (Elijah's attributes).

*+ Regardless of the extent of our sinfulness, God alerts us to repentance by various means. Let us respond to His calling without delay. He is a tender Father; He will support us, and grant us the power to reject sin's enticements.*

**(III) Christ casts out the demon which the disciples had failed to exorcize (vs. 14 - 21)**

*"And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him." Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me." And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could*

*we not cast it out?" 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. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."* (Matthew 17:14 - 21)

**Vs. 14 - 16:**

Following Christ's manifestation of His Divinity during the transfiguration, Satan's weakness before Him is accentuated. Hence, a man approached Christ, worshipped Him, and asked Him to cure his son who was possessed and suffered much - the demon would sometimes cast him on the ground, unconscious, sometimes into the fire, and other times into the water. Analogously, a wicked person, submissive to Satan, loses his peace and composure, and Satan attempts to destroy him by immersing him in various lusts. The man added that Christ's disciples had been incapable of exorcizing the demon, despite their successes in other instances where they had been dispatched to evangelize throughout Judea.

**Vs. 17 & 18:**

Christ rebuked His disciples' weak faith, as well as the man's, whose son was possessed, and who was representative of the multitude. Christ also rebuked their perversion, in reference to their having doubted God's ability, while being absorbed in worldly pleasures. The scribes had capitalized on the opportunity of the disciples' inability to exorcize the demon; they had started debating with them, emphasizing their impotence, and raising doubts about the ability of their Teacher, Christ.

Furthermore, Christ rebuked their weakness - because as soon as they had been separated from Him, their faith's weakness became apparent. In a sense, that was useful for both the disciples and the multitude - this way they knew that they derived their strength through Christ....they would then resort to Him always and be able to do anything.

Christ subsequently rebuked the demon. It left the boy immediately, and he was cured instantly.

**Vs. 19 & 20:**

*"A mustard seed"* - This is the smallest seed in size. It refers to a tiny faith. After the multitude had dispersed, the disciples asked Christ why they had failed to exorcize the demon. Christ emphasized that their lack of faith was the reason. He affirmed that a powerful, however tiny, faith, can move mountains. This was demonstrated in Cairo, Egypt, in 970 A.D. when the Moqattam Mountain was moved during the tenure of Pope Abraam Ibn

Zar'a the Syriac (the 62nd pope of Alexandria).

The intent here is not merely a "regular" mountain. Rather, the sins and disgusting pleasures, which are more difficult to "move" than ordinary mountains.

#### **V. 21:**

Christ proclaimed that in order for us to overcome Satan, we need faith, manifested in profound prayers, and fasting, since it is abstention from worldly pleasures which Satan employs to lure us. Consequently, we would strip Satan of his power, and crush him with God's might. Furthermore, fasting demonstrates our love for God more than our love for food and materialism.

*+ When God permits our weaknesses to be evident, His intent is that we examine ourselves and resort to Him; thus, we acquire greater power and advance in our spiritual life. Consequently, temptations and falls will not perturb us - we rise up quickly, fully confident that we are God's beloved children, and that His power will enable us to vanquish Satan.*

#### **(IV) Christ foretells His death to His disciples (vs. 22 & 23)**

*"Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up." And they were exceedingly sorrowful."* (Matthew 17:22 & 23)

*"Betrayed into the hands of men"* - Judas Iscariot delivered Christ to the chief priests who, in turn, delivered Him to Pilate.

During Christ's evangelizing tour throughout the Galilean region, He reaffirmed to His disciples the necessity of His being arrested, as well as the necessity of His Passion, death and resurrection. He forewarned them so that they may not be perturbed upon the materialization of those events. Likely, that was easier after His transfiguration and manifestation of His Divinity. Nevertheless, they grieved because they loved Him, and because of their weakness when facing the world without Him - since they had not yet appreciated the power of the Holy Spirit's work, and they had not fully absorbed the implication of Christ's resurrection. Their grief was also fuelled by their persisting imagination that Christ's kingdom was earthly, and that His power was physical, rather than spiritual.

*+ Ask God to guide you down the correct path. Heed the Church's teachings. Obey your confessor. You will then abandon your thoughts, understand God's will, and develop each day in His knowledge.*

**(V) Paying the temple tax (vs. 24 - 27)**

*"When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" He said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you." (Matthew 17:24 - 27)*

**V. 24:**

Each Jew was required to pay a small annual temple tax to satisfy the temple's requirements. The tax collectors had come to Judea, and had asked Peter whether Christ would pay that tax. If He declined, claiming to be a prophet, they could accuse Him of opposing the temple, and not caring for its needs. On the other hand, if He agreed to pay the tax, then He would be an ordinary citizen, not the awaited Messiah, since they continued to believe that the Messiah's kingdom would be earthly.

That was not a compulsory state tax. Rather, it was proof of the Jews' care for the temple and for worship therein.

**Vs. 25 & 26:**

Christ agreed to pay the tax. Being God, Christ was aware of the discussion that had taken place between Peter and the tax collectors, without having heard it. He therefore asked Peter whether taxes would be collected from the "*sons*" (the Jews) or "*strangers*." Peter said to Him, "*From strangers.*" Jesus said to him, "*Then the sons are free.*" This meant that since Christ was the Son of God, He owned the temple, and was therefore exempt from the temple tax.

*"Their sons"* - He meant, "the awaited Messiah and the prophets." Those would not pay tax, since they owned the temple.

*"Strangers"* - This refers to the rest of the Jews - those who are not prophets.

+ *Submit to the existing social system, out of respect for its laws - even if you disagreed with it. Your heart is preoccupied with a much more important issue, namely, your eternity.*

**V. 27:**

Due to the persistent Jewish priests' non-belief, Christ told Peter that He would pay the tax, "*lest we offend them.*" Christ then directed Peter to do what he knew best, namely, fishing. Peter would then "*cast in a hook, and take the fish which comes up first.*" That fish would have in its mouth "*a piece of money.*" That money would suffice for paying Peter's and Christ's required tax.

Christ's authority over animals was thus demonstrated, plus His knowledge of the future. Namely, Christ knew of the money in that fish's mouth, and He directed that fish to be caught on Peter's hook.

Christ also showed His love and care for Peter, so that He paid the tax on his behalf.

Finally, the extent of Christ's and the disciples' poverty is evinced, since they had no money at all.

+ *Be confident that your omnipotent God is capable of everything, and will satisfy all your needs. Be not perturbed by your opponents.*

# Chapter 18

## Offences – forgiveness

### **(I) Childlike humility (vs. 1 - 5)**

*"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, 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. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me."* (Matthew 18:1 - 5)

### **V. 1:**

The disciples continued to rationalize the kingdom of heaven from a human perspective. Therefore they asked Christ who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This reveals their thoughts and discussions as to who would be the greatest, and who would be the leader in the new kingdom - naturally, the love of leadership is a form of pride.

### **Vs. 2 & 3:**

Christ responded that the greatest is the innocent, humble, all-loving person. Christ, furthermore, demonstrated His response practically: He held a child in their midst, and requested them to be as innocent, humble and loving as that child - such were the prerequisites for accessing the kingdom of heaven. It should be noted that Christ did not answer the question of who would be the greatest - rather, He specified the conditions for entering the kingdom, in order to emphasize the principle that love of leadership and boastfulness do not lead to the kingdom of heaven.

### **V. 4:**

Finally, Christ responded directly to the disciples' question. He said that the greatest is the one whose humility, innocence and obedience to God's commandments were akin to a child's. The more a person is childlike, the more will that person enjoy Christ in eternity?

### **V. 5:**

*"In My name"* - This means "for Christ's sake."

From a different perspective, Christ honored childhood which, in those days, was neglected in most of the world's communities: Romans, Greeks,

or Jews. Christ affiliated Himself with childhood - hence, whoever accepts, and cares for, a child, is akin to someone accepting and caring for Christ Himself, because such acceptance implies love and tenderness. People usually accept the wealthy, but Christ draws their attention to accepting the weak, the rejects, and the needy - caring for them is like caring for Christ.  
+ *Do not direct your attention and caring solely towards children, rather, to anyone who needs care, or who is suffering from any ailment, but has no one caring for him. Any love you offer such a person pleases God as though you had offered that love to Him.*

## **(II) Offences (vs. 6 - 14)**

*"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes! If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."* (Matthew 18:6 - 14)

### **Vs. 6 & 7:**

*"These little ones"* - This refers to any weak person, lacking self-control, who falls easily into sin. In fact, this embodies all believers, since everyone is liable to fall into sin.

"Offence" is a compound sin, since it involves falling into sin, while causing someone else to fall as well. Offences stem from loving worldly pleasures, being inflexible, and being insensitive to others - especially the weak, such as children. Thus, an offence constitutes a significant transgression.

Whoever unrepentantly perseveres in offending others, will surely perish. His perdition is expressed as *"it would be better for him if a millstone was hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."* A

person cast into the sea, with a millstone around his neck, will most certainly drown.

Since offences will undoubtedly exist, because of people's wickedness, our Lord Christ proclaims that perdition definitely awaits whoever causes an offence - just like someone drowning in the depths of the sea. The sea's depth could symbolize worldly pleasures - since it is easy to fall into multiple sins and stray away from God.

*+ Scrutinize your speech, appearance and conduct, to ensure that others do not stray from God because of you. How could you cause those, for whom Christ died, to fall? How can you permit your carelessness to lead to their sinfulness?! The penalty is very severe for those, whose hardened heart causes offences.*

**Vs. 8 & 9:**

**"Life"** - This refers to our life on earth.

**"Lame....maimed.....with one eye"** - This refers to eliminating, from our life, the person or the issue, causing the offence, even if they were as close to us as a leg or an eye.

**"Hell fire"** - This refers to everlasting perdition.

Having accentuated the seriousness of offending others, Christ warns us not to stumble and fall into sin ourselves; He said that, however important an issue may seem to be, we must rid ourselves of it, if we perceived it to be offensive. Christ then presented the analogy of the leg, hand and eye, symbolizing things of particular importance to us. We should distance ourselves from whatever or whoever leads to evil pleasures: this could be a friend, a relative, a place, an activity, or any person Satan employs to lure us into sin. It is better to lead our earthly life relinquishing something significant - hence being like a handicapped person - than to cling to something which drags us into sin and, ultimately, eternal perdition.

*+ Having fallen, do not decide to abandon sin, while adhering to a sinful relationship. Escape with your life from that relationship, since your soul's salvation is the most important issue. Do not allow complacency to lead you to eternal perdition.*

*Be convinced, deep in your heart, that you must live for Christ forever. Thus, abandon everything that leads to sin - even at the risk of evil-doers abusing you for having distanced yourself from evil. Enduring anything - even death - is more bearable than eternal perdition.*

**Vs. 10 & 11:**

Here, Christ addresses caring for others, and not offending them through our carelessness. Christ emphasizes that God values all souls, while proclaiming

a significant tenet of the Faith, namely, each one of us has a guardian angel. God values the souls of children, the simple, and the weak; each one has a guardian angel, praying for them in heaven.

Furthermore, Christ came to redeem those who are despised; His revered blood - the greatest thing in existence - is the price of their salvation.

*+ Never belittle anyone - someone's fall because of your disparaging grieves God and His angels. God responds positively to their angels' intercessions, and lifts them up from their sins, upon their repentance.*

### **Vs. 12 - 14:**

*"The ninety-nine"* - They could symbolize the unfallen angels. They could also be a reference to those suffering from self-righteousness - God keeps them away from Him, since they do not feel the need for salvation. God searches for the fallen who admit their wickedness.

*"The mountains"* - This could refer to feeling secure in its allocated places.

*"Straying"* - This refers to those who have fallen in sin and are aware of their weakness. This could also refer to humanity, in its entirety, which strayed away from God, being distinct from angels who have not fallen.

*"He rejoices more over that sheep"* - He rejoices because the sheep was astray and dead - but returned to its true godly life.

This accentuates God's love for those who are offended due to their weakness. This is analogous to someone owning one hundred sheep but only one of them strays; he is not preoccupied by the ninety-nine - he locks them up and goes after the stray one till he finds it. God cares for, and seeks to save, each person, regardless of the extent of their weakness or wretchedness.

*+ Rest assured that you have a place in God's heart, that no one but you can fill. Having fallen, repent speedily to return to your place: you will then rejoice, and gladden Him.*

### **(III) Dealing with offenders (vs. 15 - 20)**

*"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."** (Matthew 18:15 - 20)

**V. 15:**

**"Your brother"** - This refers to any person.

**"Between you and him alone"** - Be alone with him to avoid embarrassing him in the presence of others, and to avoid provoking his pride leading him to be defensive, trying to justify himself.

**"You have gained your brother"** - This means that you would have resumed your normal, pleasant, relationship with him. At the same time, he would have regained his relationship with God.

Our Lord Christ clarifies how we should deal with anyone who wronged us. The first step is to love that person. Then we should approach him to save him from persevering in the error he had committed. In fact he had erred towards God and himself - not merely against you. You should thus reproach him lovingly, pointing out what he had done wrong.

Christ did not say "admonish him," because it is not the intent to reveal his faults and pin them on him, or extract your rights from him. Rather, the intent is to return him to Christ, and to you, through your love and care for his salvation. Therefore your approach should be gentle, tender and loving.

**V. 16:**

You should not give up hope, if the person rejected your reproach, refusing to acknowledge his error, while continuing down the offensive path. Rather, take with you one or two close friends, especially someone whom he knows, since their mediation may help in restoring a good relationship between you. The opinion of two or three persons could be more effective. On the other hand you would have, according to Mosaic law, **"the testimony of two or three witnesses"** before raising the matter to the Church (Deuteronomy 17:6).

**V. 17:**

You should still not lose hope, even upon failure of that second attempt at reconciliation. Inform the Church, hence, priests and servants, so that they may try to convince him and normalize your relationship. If he insisted on his fault(s), then you should treat him as a pagan or publican, hence, someone who does not belong to the Church. You should continue to love, and pray for, him, even in the absence of a regular relationship/friendship between you.

**V. 18:**

The Church will support your position, so that you may not blame yourself. By persisting in his erroneous path, the Church has the right to suspend his membership and prevent him from partaking of the holy sacraments. On the other hand, the Church may reinstate him if he repented; heaven would then also accept his fellowship after this life.

This constitutes a further confirmation of the priesthood's authority in the Sacrament of Penance. As mentioned in Chapter 16:19, this authority is not solely Peter's.

**Vs. 19 & 20:**

The door of hope is open, for that sinner persisting in his erroneous path. Even though the Church anathemized him, you, and all his loved ones, are still required to pray for him and for his repentance.

It is encouraging to note that the agreement of two persons, in love and prayer, is pleasing to God. Thereupon He grants their petition for the return and repentance of that sinner.

The gathering of two or three emphasizes the significance of group prayer; Christ is present in their midst with special blessings. Not only does Christ bless each participant, but He also blesses the group prayer as a whole. The greatest group prayer is the Divine Liturgy around the body and blood of our Lord. An extension thereof is the family prayer at home - hence, the parents with their children. In this prayer, they ask for the home's needs and integrity, while encouraging family members to love each other and to lead spiritual lives.

*+ Let your love be apparent, not only to those who love you, but also, even more, to those who wrongfully treat you. By loving them you seek reconciliation, and you win their souls. If your attempts failed, you should continue to pray for them and pity them - thereby increasing God's mercy towards you.*

**(IV) The extent of forgiving others (vs. 21 - 35)**

*"Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. 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!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. 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. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.'" (Matthew 18:21 - 35)*

**V. 21:**

Peter asked Christ about the extent to which we should forgive others. Should we forgive a person seven times for his wrongdoing? This is considered to be a large number, since the Jewish "Talmud" stipulates forgiveness up to three times. Peter's question implies that forgiveness has its limits - and those limits need to be known.

**V. 22:**

Christ responded, "*up to seventy times seven.*" Such a huge number means that, not only is forgiveness limitless, but also we should not consider the number of times a person keeps repeating his wrongdoings.

*+ Since God requires us to set no limits on forgiveness, we are comforted to note that His mercy, and His Divine forgiveness, are therefore boundless - as long as we are sincere in our repentance and return to Him. We should ensure that we maintain godliness and the spirit of repentance.*

**Vs. 23 & 24:**

Christ clarified, to others, the notion of unlimited forgiveness. He likened the kingdom of heaven (where we aspire to live, and which starts with the Church on earth), unto a "*certain king*" (referring to Christ the Judge) to whom a slave (a sinner) was presented, and who owed a huge sum of money (putting in perspective the "*ten thousand talents*" that he owed, Solomon's great

temple cost eight thousand!)

The idea here is that our transgressions against God are immense - even boundless; since God is unlimited, a transgression against Him entails a boundless punishment.

**V. 25:**

That slave represents anyone of us who sins against God. The slave's inability to pay his debt was emphasized. Therefore the king (God) pronounced the sentencing, namely, his wife and children (his body and talents) to be sold, in order to partly satisfy the debt. However, those could only satisfy a minute part of the huge debt. This accentuates the extent of human wickedness and weakness before Divine justice.

**Vs. 26 & 27:**

The slave fell on his knees pleading for mercy, so that he may not be sold (which refers being delivered to Satan and eternal torment). At this point, the extent of God's forgiveness is manifested: the debt was forgiven, and the slave, his wife and children were all spared. This refers to Christ's redeeming blood, which forgives our sins, and renews our bodies, spirits and talents. God, through His tenderness, did not merely grant the slave a chance to pay his debt, as he had requested, but He also completely forgave him the debt, since He knew that the slave would be unable to repay the debt, regardless of the length of time granted.

**Vs. 28 - 30:**

After having been spared from paying his entire (huge) debt, that slave encountered a colleague - hence, someone who had erred against him - who owed him one hundred denarii, which is almost nothing compared to the ten thousand talents he had owed to his master.

The "*ten thousand*" epitomizes the significant magnitude of the slave's transgression, hence, deserving eternal punishment.

Despite the second slave's pleading for mercy, the first slave was cruel and refused to forgive his brother; rather, he cast him in jail, thus desiring his soul's perdition and eternal torment.

**Vs. 31 - 34:**

When the slave's "*fellow servants*" (they represent the Church) observed what had happened, "*they were very grieved;*" thus, they prayed for the second slave who had been cast in jail.

The king (God) heard, through the Church, what had transpired. He brought the first slave and castigated him for his cruelty, for failing to appreciate the

Divine forgiveness that had been granted to him, and for harshly refusing to forgive his brother. The king then ordered that slave be cast in prison, pending his repayment of every cent he owed. The intent is for him to remain in prison, hence, eternal torment, for failing to forgive his brother - since it would be impossible for him to pay back his unlimited debt.

**V. 35:**

At the parable's conclusion, Christ confirmed that it is intended to emphasize that God will never forgive whoever fails to forgive others. Christ said "**My heavenly Father**" because anyone failing to forgive fellow humans is unworthy of calling God his "Father." For this reason, Christ did not say "your Father."

*+ Offer your repentance, daily, before God, confident in His forgiveness. Let your repentance be accompanied by sincere thanksgiving. As you struggle to rectify your faults, God will support you - and your thanks will increase. At that point you will be sympathetic towards those who wrong you, because they are ailing like you, they need Divine forgiveness, and they need the healing balm from Him. Be not perturbed by them, because your sins are greater than theirs before God. Pray for yourself and for them - then God's mercy will envelop you all.*

## Chapter 19

### Marriage - Celibacy - Austerity/Asceticism

#### **(I) Oneness in marriage (vs. 1 - 9)**

*"Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?' And He answered and said to them, 'Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.'" They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."'" (Matthew 19:1 - 9)*

#### **Vs. 1 & 2:**

*"Beyond the Jordan"* - That region, adjacent to the River Jordan, was called "Perea." It used to be inhabited by the tribes of Reuben and Gad, plus half of Manasseh. Today, that region is called "Golan."

Following the teachings mentioned by the evangelist in the previous chapter, Christ left the northern Galilean region, where He had spent almost three years, and proceeded to Judea, which is the southern region, in which Jerusalem was located. Christ passed by the River Jordan, but He did not hasten towards Jerusalem - rather He spent some time in that vicinity, before proceeding to Jerusalem.

Christ spent about six months during His journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. During that period several events occurred, mentioned in the gospels of Sts. Luke and John. St. Matthew mentioned only a few in Chapters 19 and 20. St. Matthew stated that multitudes followed Christ. He taught many spiritual teachings and, as usual, healed their afflictions.

#### **Vs. 3 - 6:**

The statements in these verses, concerning the Sacrament of Holy

Matrimony, are quite clear. Our Lord Christ sanctioned it by attending the wedding, at Cana of Galilee, at the beginning of His ministry. The Pharisees had asked Christ about situations when it would be permissible for a man to divorce his wife. However, they knew Christ's position, since His sermon on the mount, namely, divorce is only permissible in the case of adultery (Chapter 5:32). The intent of their question was therefore not for knowing the truth, rather, to ensnare Christ into saying something against the Mosaic covenant - if Christ prohibited divorce, He would be in contravention of the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 24:1 & 3), which permits divorce. They could also provoke Herod against Him, since he had divorced his wife and married Herodias.

Christ then referred to what Moses had said, as stated in the Torah. He reminded them of the beginning of creation, when God created Eve from Adam's side; Adam, prophetically, proclaimed that upon marrying, the man leaves his father and mother and clings unto his wife and "***they shall become one flesh.***" (Genesis 2:24) That is how God joined them through the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony - how can we permit separation of what God had united??

Thus, divorce constitutes breaking, and contravention of, what God had established.

#### **Vs. 7 & 8:**

The Pharisees objected to what Christ said, stating that whereas Moses had permitted divorce, how could Christ prohibit it? Christ responded saying that Moses had granted that derogation purely because of the depreciation of their spiritual standards, promulgated by their melding with the Egyptians which, in turn, precipitated adoption of the Egyptians' practice of divorce. Thus, upon their exodus into the wilderness, Moses gradually redirected them towards the original law, by restricting the conditions for divorce, until such a time when they would abandon that practice entirely. The natural, sound, situation, which God had established in the garden of Eden between Adam and Eve, was the union of both, with no allowance for divorce. Moses never decreed divorce. Quite the contrary, he said that whoever desired to divorce his wife must proceed with caution, and write for her a "***certificate of divorce,***" thus giving himself a chance to reconsider. He may recant, after realizing that his wife would be with someone else, and that his home and family would be ruined.

#### **V. 9:**

Following Christ's discussion with the Pharisees, He entered a house, as St. Mark recorded (Mark 10:10). He concluded His discourse, with His disciples,

confirming the New Testament covenant, namely, the only permissible case for divorce in Christianity is adultery committed by one of the spouses. In such a case, the offending party would have already been physically separated from the other - divorce would have thus been achieved physically; a certificate of divorce would then be allowed.

On the other hand, the Church will not permit someone to divorce his wife because of disagreements between them because, according to God, they are united.

Finally, the Church will reject being bypassed through a civil marriage permitted by a civil divorce; both parties will have thus fallen into adultery, by entering into subsequent marital relations not sanctioned by the Church.

*+ Divorce is not the solution for differences in habits and opinions. The solution lies in resorting to God for help in relinquishing some habits. In this case, not only will peace reign in the home, but also a person's self-control is strengthened. This, in turn, leads to spiritual growth and control of personal tendencies towards pleasures and transgressions. In this way, the hardship is converted into blessings; put differently, marital problems could become opportunities for spiritual growth.*

## **(II) Celibacy (vs. 10 - 12)**

***"His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."*** (Matthew 19:10 - 12)

### **V. 10:**

Christ's audience felt that His prohibiting divorce except in the case of adultery, was beyond human endurance. Their failure to appreciate the greatness of oneness between a married couple led them to believe that it would be easier simply not to marry at all. In their view, divorce due to disagreements was straightforward - they were unprepared to tolerate one another.

### **Vs. 11 & 12:**

Christ seized that opportunity to explain the difference between being merely "single" and being "celibate." He said that unmarried people fall into one of three groups:

1. Some are born with a sexual deficiency prohibiting marriage. Thus,

they remain celibate not by choice or for their love of being close to God, rather, because of their impotence.

2. Some have had themselves castrated in order to secure jobs in kings' and nobility's palaces, as attendants for women - the masters would then have no fear of their women being aggressed. Remaining single in such cases would be a choice perpetuated by love of money, position, or pleasing people. This is the worst category.

3. Some have transcended above the sexual instinct, transforming it into energy directed at loving God. Despite their physical ability to be married, they redirected their thoughts and hearts towards loving God as the heavenly Groom. They are thus in constant spiritual wedlock with God - much more sublime than any human marriage.

Such is celibacy: it could be either through service in the world or through monasticism. It is specific to those whom God has endowed with such grace, coupled with their tendency to appreciate its sufficiency. Not everyone is capable of accepting it. It is great indeed, for those qualified for it.

**"He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."** - This refers to whoever has a tendency towards celibacy. It would be good for them to live in this fashion, and enjoy consecrating their thoughts and hearts to God.

+ *If you did not happen to be destined for celibacy, then you should at least remain chaste prior to marrying. Even after the wedding, you should not be predominantly preoccupied by sexual relations, to the extent that you may be at odds with your partner. Rather, make more time in your heart for loving God, as well as for loving your spouse and respecting his/her feelings. Your thoughts should therefore be focused on how to please your spouse. Genuine love means seeking to please your spouse, rather than yourself.*

### **(III) Christ's love of children (vs. 13 - 15)**

**"Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." And He laid His hands on them and departed from there." (Matthew 19:13 - 15)**

### **V. 13:**

Our Lord Christ regularly blessed and healed the sick. He devoted much attention to teaching and solving people's problems. Consequently, some parents brought Him their children to be blest.

The disciples, though, felt that their Teacher's time was too valuable to waste caring for children. They thus tried to keep them away from Him so that He may focus on adults' problems.

### **Vs. 14 & 15:**

Our Lord Christ did not merely bless and welcome the children - rather, He proclaimed an important fact, namely, those were the heavenly kingdom's children, whose example of childlike innocence and simplicity we should follow. In those days, children were neglected by prevailing religions, as well as by prevailing kingdoms and political regimes. Christianity, on the other hand, awards much care and attention to children, and even calls upon adults to learn from them, and to care for, and nurture, them.

*"Of such"* - This refers to those who follow the children's example of innocence and simplicity.

### **(IV) The rich young man (vs. 16 - 22)**

*"Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to Him, "Which ones?" Jesus said, "'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." (Matthew 19:16 - 22)*

### **Vs. 16 & 17:**

A young, rich (verse 22), man approached Christ. Being the leader of one of the Jewish synagogues (Luke 18:18), he was used to speaking eloquently. Therefore, he addressed Christ as *"Good Teacher,"* and asked Him a spiritual question, namely, what a person should do in order to attain eternal life. Despite Christ's acknowledgement of the question, He pointed out, initially, to the young man that words of praise must be used if, and only if, understood - hence - He thus told him, *"Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God."* Put differently, Christ's question means, *"Do you believe that I am God - or are you merely flattering Me?"* Of course, Christ is the Good Teacher, the Good Shepherd (as He referred to Himself, John 10:11), and the Sinless God as He told the Jews, *"Which of you convicts Me of sin?"* (John 8:46) Christ finally answered the man's question, saying that the way to eternal life is through knowing and applying the commandments throughout our life.

**Vs. 18 & 19:**

The young man asked Christ whether He was referring to any specific commandments. Christ responded *"All the commandments on the tablets which Moses had received from God, pertaining to worshipping God and dealing with fellow humans."* Christ focused on the second tablet's commandments, hence, dealing with fellow humans, since they cannot be fulfilled without, a priori, satisfying the first tablet's commandments, namely, loving and worshipping God.

Christ concluded His response by summarizing the second tablet's commandments: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

**V. 20:**

The young man answered without hesitation that he had kept all those commandments since childhood. Christ's intent, though, was the commandments' profound, not superficial, application. Christ focused on treating the young man's fundamental ailment, namely, his love of money; He told him that he lacked treatment of just one element, namely, his love of money (Mark 10:21).

**V. 21:**

Christ asked the young man to sell all his possessions, and distribute the money to the poor. In this way, he would transform his terrestrial treasure into a celestial one, with his heart attached to it. A corollary would be following Christ by applying His teachings.

*+ Practical application of this commandment epitomizes Christianity's perfection. Being unable to apply it to the letter, as did our father the great St. Anthony, should at least lead us to purge our hearts from the love of money; put differently, we should at least relinquish some of our possessions and donate the proceeds to the needy.*

**V. 22:**

Christ's clear statements revealed the young man's weakness, namely, his love of money, since, *"he went away sorrowful,"* for being unable to fulfill Christ's words - he loved money more than God. The abundance of his wealth facilitated his heart's adherence to loving money.

*+ In order to be the kingdom's child, you should be more God-loving than materialist. This can be evidenced by your offering your first fruits or tithes, regardless of your financial situation. You should also be content with everything, and be willing to relinquish material acquisitions, in order to please those around you.*

**(V) The love of money (vs. 23 - 26)**

*"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. 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." When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.""* (Matthew 19:23 - 26)

**Vs. 23 & 24:**

Christ commented to His disciples on His discussion with the young man, after the latter's departure. He explained the risk associated with loving money. He used an impossible analogy, *"a camel to go through the eye of a needle,"* illustrating the extreme difficulty for a wealthy person, whose full reliance is on money, to enter the kingdom of heaven. A wealthy person must, a priori, purge his heart from the love of, and reliance on, money. Extreme wealth does not impede entering the kingdom of heaven, as long as it does not dominate the heart.

**Vs. 25 & 26:**

The disciples sensed difficulty in applying Christ's teaching, since their thoughts were focused on Christ's earthly reign, and the love of wealth and stature. Christ thus redirected their thoughts to God's support for achieving that goal, stating that whatever seemed impossible from the human perspective was possible for God.

That was indeed the case in the lives of many rich saints, who abandoned all their wealth and possessions, and led impoverished monastic lives; some of them gave themselves up to torture and martyrdom for Christ's sake.

*+ Thank God for any wealth or possessions you may have. Be content with what you have and do not compare yourself with others who may be wealthier. Grieve not over losses, since money is changeable. Rather, render your losses a motive for adherence to God's love - this is the only solid foundation, and immovable support.*

**(VI) Rewarding the shepherds (vs. 27 - 30)**

*"Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" 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. 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.***" (Matthew 19:27 - 30)

**V. 27:**

After Christ had emphasized the importance of abandoning the love of money, as a prerequisite for following Him, Peter wanted to satisfy himself and the rest of the disciples, about their reward, given that they had left everything to follow Christ...The intent here is not merely leaving their nets and belongings - those were insignificant - rather, enduring hardships associated with the Pharisees' resistance.

Peter's statement could indicate some weakening in his faith - since he sought confirmation from Christ about his reward. It could also indicate self-recognition that he had indeed given. He would discover though, following the redemption, that everything we can possibly give, amounts to nothing when compared to the perfect love, when Christ offered Himself on the Cross for the sake of mankind's salvation.

**V. 28:**

Christ proclaimed a great reward, not only for His disciples, but also for everyone who follows Him. He said that "***in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory,***" when Christ's image changes from the frail human form to that of God, the Judge, in the kingdom, His followers would be beside Him, having a significant stature - since He said, ***you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.***" Hence, because of their faith and their evangelism, they would judge the Jews who had rejected the Faith - although they were supposed to have been the first to accept Him.

**V. 29:**

Christ confirmed the reward for all ascetics and all who relinquish possessions or loved ones for the sake of consecrating their hearts to God's service and love. The reward is receipt of one hundred fold in this life - not material compensation, rather, compensation in terms of peace and love. An example is that of the monk who left father or mother, and who opted for a lifestyle of celibacy, but who bred children for God. God will then render all people to be brothers, sisters, and loved ones for him. God will become his Father, caring for him, and compensating him for all biological parenthood. All will become his children, and he will find more than what suffices for his material needs.

Some monks are selected for ordainment as bishops; all the Church's finances are then within their charge, for wise dispositioning. A much more valuable, and unutterable, reward, is the eternal compensation awaiting them.

God can never be indebted to anyone. God will compensate us for whatever we abandon in this life; He will provide for our children, and compensate us with the greatest reward ever, namely, the kingdom of heaven. Such is the glaring truth we observe consistently: those who love God and abandon materialism, are granted grace in the eyes of everyone, and are loved by many.

**V. 30:**

We will thus find many distinguished people in this world, either occupying secondary positions in heaven, or even having no position at all in heaven. Conversely, many of this world's rejects and underprivileged could become great in the kingdom of heaven. Examples are the ascetic saints who abandoned everything to live in the wilderness, and the martyrs who endured much suffering. Also, those who consider themselves to be "first," meaning the proud, will be overtaken by the humble, meaning those who consider themselves to be "last."

Another likely meaning is possible; namely, those who were called first, hence, the Jews, may be rejected for having failed to believe - while the Gentiles, who were called later and believed, may have distinguished positions in heaven.

*+ Be confident that whatever you relinquish on earth, will be compensated in terms of peace and joy in this life, and much more in heaven. Do not be perturbed by material losses incurred for Christ's sake; and do not be perturbed for abandoning something in order to win others' love for their souls' salvation. Quite the contrary, you are wiser because of your ability to give in this world - since this is a proclamation of your love for Christ.*

## Chapter 20

### Parable of the laborers - Christ foretells His Passion and Crucifixion - the disciples' quest for leadership - healing the blind

#### (I) Parable of the laborers (vs. 1 - 16)

*"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 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?' 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.' 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.' And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, 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.' But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."* (Matthew 20:1 - 16)

#### Vs. 1:

*"A landowner"* - This is in reference to God.

*"Vineyard"* - This refers to the Church.

*"The labourers"* - Those are all humans whom God calls in order to live with Him, and serve Him.

#### Vs. 2 - 7:

God is the One Who went out - put differently, it was God's initiative to seek humans, offering them His love. He went out at dawn, the first hour, seeking His children's hearts.

Five canonical hours were identified in Judaism - with each hour not being equal to sixty minutes. Those "hours" could symbolize a human's life stages

or, alternatively, stages of the world's history.

Thus, in terms of life's stages:

<i>First hour:</i>	Childhood.
<i>Second hour:</i>	Pubescence.
<i>Third hour:</i>	Youth.
<i>Fourth hour:</i>	Adulthood - maturity.
<i>Fifth hour:</i>	Seniority - old age.

In terms of world history:

<i>First hour:</i>	Adam.
<i>Second hour:</i>	Noah.
<i>Third hour:</i>	Abraham.
<i>Fourth hour:</i>	Moses and the prophets.
<i>Fifth hour:</i>	Christ.

This means that throughout humanity's history, and throughout a person's lifetime, God has sought, and continues to seek man, prompting him towards salvation.

#### **Vs. 8 - 10:**

**"Evening"** - This refers to the end of a person's life or Judgment Day.

**"His steward"** - This refers to the angels.

**"Those....who were hired about the eleventh hour"** - When the landowner blamed them for doing nothing, they said, **"No one hired us"** (verse 7). This means that they had failed to understand God's call. They spent their entire life without doing any spiritual work, till being finally alerted at their life's end.

**"A denarius"** - This refers to salvation and eternal life.

Therefore, anyone who has believed on Christ, and worked with Him - even for a single hour - receives eternal life. However, there are degrees, depending on the extent of a person's closeness to God.

God's call may have come towards the end of a person's life; but if the person responded whole-heartedly, he becomes like those of the first hour - and may even be greater, if his love of God were greater.

Someone might say, *"Since salvation is granted to all, I shall wait until the eleventh hour; I do not wish to be distinguished in heaven."* Such a statement implies:

1. That person is totally unaware that his life could end at any moment.
2. That person is totally unable to appreciate the value of God's love and fellowship with God. He therefore belittles his relationship with God on earth.

#### **Vs. 11 - 16:**

The first hour laborers symbolize the Jews, who had thought that salvation was available uniquely to them - but not to the Gentiles. They also thought

that non-Jewish believers would be inferior to Jewish converts. They referred to the eleventh hour laborers as "*These last men,*" while Christ called them "*Friend.*"

Such a rebellious attitude constitutes interference in the work of God the Judge: He gave each one in accordance with their respective agreement - then He decided to confer upon others, without diminishing the share of either Jew or rebel.

*"Is your eye evil"* - This refers to selfishness, hence, desiring goodness for oneself while denying it to others - consequently envying others for what they received.

*"Many are called"* - God desires salvation for all. However, only a few would be saved - those who believe, and live in love.

Therefore, our Lord Christ grants salvation to all who believe on Him and live with Him in His Church; whether they led an entire life of repentance, or repentance materialized only towards the end of life.

The above discussion addresses access to the kingdom of heaven - however, it does not in any way negate the fact that places and ranks do exist in the kingdom of heaven.

+ *We should consider all humans to be reflective of the image of God, and that they have preceded us to the kingdom. We should do good to everyone, especially the weak and the stray, aiming for their repentance, and knowing that they could, potentially, exceed our love of God.*

## **(II) Christ foretells His Passion and Crucifixion (vs. 17 - 19)**

*"Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again.""* (Matthew 20:17 -19)

Towards the end of Christ's life on earth, and as He approached Jerusalem with His disciples, He alerted them, for the third time, to the suffering He would endure on behalf of humanity. That suffering would include the Jews' persecution, and their use of the Gentiles - the Roman authority - to dispense with Him through crucifixion leading to His death. However, through His Divinity, He would rise on the third day.

Christ foretold His suffering so that His disciples would not be perturbed upon materialization of those events. He had repeated this prophecy several times, because they were fixated on the idea of His terrestrial reign. Thus, they considered news of His suffering and death to be particularly strange.

+ *God tries to prepare your heart for forthcoming events which you do*

*not know and which you would be unable to accept. Respond to His voice by being closer to Him, by repenting and strengthening your relationship with Him, and by accepting events contrary to your liking. At that point, your strength and steadfastness will increase, and nothing will disturb you - whether leading to perplexity or sadness. Trust in God's supporting presence - then you will traverse all eventualities peacefully.*

**(III) The disciples' quest for leadership (vs. 20 - 28)**

*"Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father." And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. 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. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave-- 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 20:20 - 28)*

**Vs. 20 & 21:**

*"Then"* - This followed Christ's foretelling His Passion.

*"The mother of Zebedee's sons"* - This was Salome, whose sons had instigated her approach to Christ, so that she may support their request from Him. This is evinced by the fact that Christ's response was addressed to them - not to their mother.

*"Asking something"* - She appreciated the significance of what she was about to ask, and she realized that it could be rejected. That was the reason for her *"asking something from Him."*

*"What do you wish?"* - Our Lord Christ knew what she wanted. However, He was giving her a chance to reconsider.

The mother of Zebedee's two sons approached Christ, along with her sons. She knelt before Him in worship. Believing, like the rest of the Jews, that

Christ's reign would be terrestrial, she wanted that her sons, out of love for them, occupy a more distinguished position in that realm, than the rest of the disciples - thus having leadership positions over the others, with one on either side of Christ.

**Vs. 22 & 23:**

Christ drew the attention of those two disciples to the suffering that He would endure in order to attain the kingdom of heaven - this lasts an entire lifetime. He said that, in order to divert their fixation on earthly positions, and induce them to think of the kingdom of heaven in spiritual terms; in turn, this translates to loving God and fellowshiping with Him, as opposed to seeking worldly stature and leadership.

He asked them a clear question: *"Are you able to endure the cup of suffering and the sting of death?"* They answered, with neither hesitation nor understanding, *"We are able."*

At that point, Christ pointed out to them that presence in the kingdom is God granted grace. Hence, no human can, solely on his own free will, endure sufferings for Christ's sake - God's help is necessary.

*"But it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."* - This is in reference to those who have completed their struggle, and have deserved God's grace. Although the wills of the Son and the Father are one, Christ said *"My Father,"* in order to elevate their thoughts from the terrestrial kingdom with Him, to the celestial kingdom with the Father.

**V. 24:**

Feelings of grandeur were stirred in the disciples' hearts, upon hearing James' and John's aspiration to leadership. They were displeased fearing the two would be granted their request.

**Vs. 25 - 27:**

Christ warned them that the quest for leadership constitutes the worldly, as opposed to God's children's, approach. He accentuated clearly the importance of serving each other, and submission to each other, which would render them great in God's view, and earn them a special stature in heaven. Put differently, whereas the world seeks leadership and control, God's children seek service and humility.

**V. 28:**

Christ presented Himself as the perfect example of humility: He did not seek a worldly position so that others might serve Him - rather, He came to serve humanity, and to die for humanity's redemption.

+ *Are you seeking services that you can offer to others, and are you seeking ways for submitting to others, or, are you seeking stature and honor among them? May you start, today, submitting to others, in order to exalt yourself in God's eyes.*

**(IV) Christ opens the eyes of two blind men (vs. 29 - 34)**

*"Now as they went out of Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!" Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!" So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Lord, that our eyes may be opened." So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him."* (Matthew 20:29 - 34)

**Vs. 29 & 30:**

That was the last miracle that Christ performed prior to His entry into Jerusalem. As He proceeded along the way with the multitude, He was accosted by two blind men - who could have been panhandlers - seated by the wayside.

Upon hearing the multitude's tumult, and knowing that that was the procession of Christ Who healed the sick, they believed on His power to heal, and cried out to Him entreating His healing power, and fully confident that He was indeed the awaited Messiah, the Son of David.

Although St. Matthew mentioned two blind men, Sts. Mark and Luke mentioned only one; that could have been the more vocal one of the two (Mark 10:46 - 52 and Luke 18:35 - 43).

**V. 31:**

Irritated by their cries, the multitude tried to silence them so that they may hear Christ's teaching. Nevertheless, they persisted in their cries, proclaiming their faith, and their dire need for being cured, while seizing that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

+ *Persevere in your requests from God. This accentuates the extent of your faith, and shields you from human thoughts that steer you away from God.*

**Vs. 32 - 34:**

Christ stopped and called the blind men to Him - He always tends to those who seek Him. Although He expects little, He desires persistence in prayer. He asked them what they wanted - so that they may show their need to be cured. Thus, they proclaimed their need. Christ tenderly healed them. They were so exuberant, that they followed Him to enjoy, along with the others, listening to His teachings and witnessing His miracles.

*+ God wills to grant you spiritual vision - hence, discernment and understanding, if such were indeed your persistent quest. His tenderness towards you is unlimited. Having been granted wisdom and discernment, follow Christ throughout all steps of your life - thus rendering your faith practical, rather than theoretical. You will thus enjoy fellowshiping with Him each and every day - much more so than earlier.*

## Chapter 21

### Christ's entry into Jerusalem - parable of the vinedressers

#### (I) Christ's entry into Jerusalem (vs. 1 - 11)

*"Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.' " So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' Hosanna in the highest!" And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?" So the multitudes said, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee." (Matthew 21:1 - 11)*

#### Vs. 1 - 3:

This chapter heralds the beginning of events which transpired during the last week of Christ's life on earth. The holy Bible records those events in detail, since they pertain to the fulfillment of salvation for mankind in its entirety. Christ approached Jerusalem on Sunday morning, passing through the village of Bethphage, by the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem.

*"Then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them.'"*

That could have been Divine economy. Alternatively, owners of the donkey and colt could have been advised, through means unrecorded in the Bible, that the Lord's disciples would come asking for them.

We note the extent of Christ's humility: Behold, the Creator of heaven and

earth, says that He needed the donkey and its colt!!

He thus demonstrates His need for His children's souls - so that they may return to Him and live with Him.

He is perfect and He grants all bounties; but His love and humility lead Him to ask....

As He tenderly rides the donkey and its colt, He demonstrates His compassion for His creation - and, even more so, for humanity....

Christ granted authority to His disciples - the New Testament priests; He granted them authority to loose humanity's ties....thus, through the Sacrament of Penance, they lose repentants' ties.

**Vs. 4 & 5:**

*"The daughter of Zion"* - This is one of Jerusalem's labels.

Christ's fulfillment of prophecies is a usual proclamation by the evangelist, Matthew; he thus quotes Zechariah the prophet's prophecy, in Zechariah 9:9, that Christ the King would enter Jerusalem in meekness and humility, to rule over hearts. Since His kingdom is not terrestrial, His procession is simple, and He rides on weak animals such as the donkey and its colt.

**V. 6:**

The disciples did what Christ told them to do. They brought Him the donkey and its colt, so that He may enter Jerusalem riding them.

**V. 7:**

Jewish customs were such that removing one's garment and giving it to someone was an indication of submission to that person - since it implied relinquishing what was necessary and yielding to the other party.

Furthermore, the multitude spread their garments on the ground trodden by Christ, to be blest by Him.

+ *Cast away your material preoccupations through fasting and austerity, thereby enjoying the blessings of the God to Whom you submit. He will then fill you with His grace.*

**V. 8:**

Not only did the multitude spread their clothes on the road, to have them blest by Christ as He walked on them, but they also *"cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road,"* so that greenery may cover the ground as the donkey and its colt passed over them, symbolizing the abundance of goodness, since God is the Source of all goodness.

***"Branches from the trees.....on the road"*** - Those could symbolize *"everything which is elevated, being at Christ's feet."*

All the multitudes that preceded Christ to prepare the way, as well as all those who followed Him, proclaimed their faith that He was indeed the awaited Messiah, the Son of David, coming to save them in the name of the Lord.

One could speculate that *"the multitudes who went before"* may symbolize the Old Testament men of God, while *"those who followed"* may symbolize the New Testament believers - they all sought salvation in Christ. ***"Hosanna"*** - This is derived from Greek, and means *"please save us."* Christ is the Savior Who elevates us to the kingdom of heaven.

### **Vs. 10 & 11:**

Despite being a simple, people's procession, it was mighty, since all hearts clung to Christ Who loved them and cared for them. When the city's rulers and priests asked about the Person being honored in that procession, they learned that He was Jesus of Nazareth, the multitudes' Teacher, Caregiver, and Healer of their afflictions.

+ *Winning others' love should be your priority - rather than focusing on perishing statures such as superiority or leadership.*

### **(II) Christ purges the temple (vs. 12 - 17)**

***"Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, 'It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.' " Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant and said to Him, "Do You hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?" Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there."*** (Matthew 21:12 - 17)

### **Vs. 12 & 13:**

Worshippers congregated in several open porches attached to the temple. Also in those porches were merchants selling birds and animals required for sacrifices.

Since Jews worshipping in the temple hailed from various regions, the priests

arranged for money changers to be available for changing currencies to the local one - thereby reaping huge profits from such transactions.

Congregants' preoccupation was thus diverted towards material needs and acquisitions, as opposed to worship. Likely, items available on sale were not exclusively associated with sacrifices.

Since it was necessary to maintain the temple's sanctity, devoting it to worship and teaching, selling all the congregants' necessities should have taken place away from the temple's porches.

Christ's zeal for the house of God was demonstrated when He (according to John 2:15) "*made a whip of cords,*" to drive out all those who bought and sold doves and animals, and all who did business inside the temple (it could be speculated that the whip symbolizes the Holy Spirit, Who reproaches us for being preoccupied with material issues while worshipping inside the church.) Christ proclaimed that the house of God is dedicated solely to prayer and worship, as mentioned in Isaiah 56:7 "*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.*"

The house of God shall not be used for commercial profits. The priests and their followers had become fixated on loving money, just like thieves who steal in order to amass much wealth. By trading in that fashion, they had transformed the temple into a den for thieves to accumulate their material gains. The holy Bible does not record the day on which this event occurred.

#### **Vs. 14 - 16:**

Following Christ's purging, calm reigned in the temple, along with the opportunity for practicing spiritual work. Christ then healed the blind and the lame, so they may be enlightened with the knowledge of God, and hasten towards a spiritual lifestyle.

Furthermore, arrivals at the temple, some of whom could have been among those welcoming Christ's entry into Jerusalem, believed that Christ was indeed the awaited Messiah. They repeated the acclamations, greeting His arrival, especially by the children who had memorized the much-repeated expression, "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*"

The chief priests and scribes were irritated by those acclamations, since they constituted clear declaration that Christ was the awaited Messiah, the Son of David, as stated in the prophecies. Therefore, they told Him, "*Do You hear what these are saying?*"

Christ responded quoting what had been prophesied in Psalm 8:2, namely, that God prepares praises for Him out of the mouths of babes and infants.

#### **V. 17:**

Subsequently, Christ went to the village of Bethany, where He spent the

night, prior to returning to Jerusalem. That is the village where Christ's friend, Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead, lived. Several meanings have been proposed for the name "Bethany;" these include "house of poverty," "house of depression," and "house of misery."

+ *Your heart is God's temple. Do not allow it to be dominated by worldly preoccupations, because God created it within you for the purpose of offering prayers to Him. Dedicate a sufficient amount of time for prayers before tending to your routine tasks. Also, let prayers permeate your work - short, frequent, prayers, will increase your enjoyment of fellowshiping with God.*

### **(III) The fig tree (vs. 18 - 22)**

*"Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.'" (Matthew 21:18 - 22)*

#### **Vs. 18 & 19:**

In the morning, Christ proceeded from Bethany, walking towards Jerusalem, in order to resume His teaching. On the way, He hungered - thereby providing further proof of His humanity. He espied in the distance a fig tree, bearing much greenery. He approached it to eat of its figs - but as He came closer, He found that it bore no fruit. He then declared that it would never bear any fruit. The tree immediately withered and died. That was proof of Christ's Divinity.

Christ did this to demonstrate the risk of superficiality in one's spiritual life. An example was the Jews who appeared to know God, yet bore no fruit of love for their fellow humans.

We note that St. Matthew recorded the disciples' seeing the tree's immediate withering following being cursed. St. Mark (11:14 & 20), on the other hand, mentions that the disciples noticed the withered tree the following morning. God will reject anyone having the appearance of piety while lacking its profoundness. Such people are sentenced to perdition, since others will approach them and find no spiritual fruit.

*"The fig tree"* - This symbolizes the Jewish nation and its temple. Because of the Jews' rejection of Christ, their temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. The fig

tree's withering bears the prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction.

It should be noted that, whereas Christ's miracles accentuate His mercy, this particular miracle is the only one proclaiming God's justice; this gives us a comprehensive perspective concerning God, remembering His mercy and justice simultaneously. Consequently, we should be motivated to repent and enjoy His mercy.

#### **Vs. 20 - 22:**

The disciples were amazed at the fig tree's "*immediate*" withering. Christ seized that opportunity to demonstrate to them the power of faith, which could enable them to achieve anything, even unto uprooting a "*mountain*" and casting it into the sea.

The "*mountain*" symbolizes the multiplicity of lusts which could dominate the heart; a person having faith and strong adherence to God can cast that mountain into the "*sea*," which symbolizes the world. The result would be ridding oneself from worldly lusts.

*+ We can receive everything we request through persistent, faithful, prayer - provided that our requests are in accordance with God's will. Therefore, never relent - rather, pose your petitions before God, in sincere faith, and perseverance. He loves to hear your voice, and to shower you with His bounties.*

#### **(IV) Christ's authority (vs. 23 - 27)**

*"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?" 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: 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?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." 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." (Matthew 21:23 - 27)*

#### **V. 23:**

The elders and chief priests tried to trap Christ into committing an error, since He hailed from the tribe of Judah - rather than being a Levite, the tribe responsible for teaching.

They noted His powerful teaching, and the way He drove out the merchants

from the temple. They asked Him by whose authority He was doing all that and performing miracles - had the chief priest authorized Him??

They did not pose this question with the intent of finding out His Divine power - rather; they wanted Him to err, contravening the law and the temple's rules.

**Vs. 24 - 27:**

The high priests used human cunning and prowess in questioning Christ. Christ, on the other hand, used genuine wisdom, and responded to them with a question; He did not intend to evade their query, since His question couched the answer to theirs. Namely, Christ said that, had they believed on John the Baptist's calling, they would have believed what John had said about Christ and His authority. Christ's question specifically addressed the source of John's baptism: Was it from heaven, hence, God-sent, or was it of the people, hence, a mere human fabrication?

Thus, they reasoned among themselves: If they said it was God-sent, Christ would then ask why they did not believe, and why they were not baptized at John's hands; however, if they said they rejected John's baptism, they feared the people's reprisal, since everyone believed that John was a great prophet. Therefore *"they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know.""*

Their inability to answer Christ's question was thus revealed; they feared proclaiming their underlying opinion, namely, rejecting John, for fear of losing their positions and authority, and for their unpreparedness to accept repentance. Therefore Christ told them: *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."*

Christ's rebuttal unequivocally upended their attempts at ensnaring Him; rather, they should have focused their efforts on rectifying their weaknesses, accepting John's calling, and repenting.

+ *Be not prejudiced in your discussions with others, rather, seek whatever benefits you. Learn from, and love, everyone.*

**(V) Parable of the two sons and the vineyard (vs. 28 - 32)**

*"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.' He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. 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. 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.""* (Matthew 21:28 - 32)

**Vs. 28 - 30:**

**"The vineyard"** - This represents the opportunity which life offers us on earth: we may either struggle throughout in genuine worship of God, or we may squander it in worldly pleasures.

Given the elders' and chief priests' refusal to accept either John's calling, or Christ's evangelism, Christ gave them a parable about a father - referring to God - who had two sons:

*The first son:*

He represents the Gentiles, who had refused working in the father's vineyard, hence, the Church, but repented later and worked in the vineyard. He also represents the publicans and sinners who led sinful lives, away from the Church, but subsequently believed on Christ, repented, and became saints.

*The second son:*

He represents the Jews, or the scribes and Pharisees. They proclaimed their full submission to God, but they refused to lead godly lives; put differently, they rejected belief on Christ and adherence to the Church.

**Vs. 31 & 32:**

Christ subsequently asked them, which of the two sons had done his father's will? They said it was the first. Then He told them clearly that people leading ungodly lives, such as publicans and adulterers, in other words, people fully immersed in sinful living, may eventually believe and repent, and precede to heaven those who call themselves believers, such as the Jews, but do not do God's will in terms of love and good deeds to fellow humans. Thus, the stray are the Church's true children, Christ's believers - but not the rebellious Jews.

**"In the way of righteousness"** - John the Baptist proclaimed the truth to you, namely, the necessity of repenting and returning to God.

**"You did not afterward relent and believe him"** - In other words, you continue to persist in non-repentance, contenting yourselves with superficial worship, while retaining evil hearts.

+ *When God calls you to repentance, through the holy Bible, Church teachings, comments by those around you, or any other means, do not procrastinate your return to God, and do not promise Him simply through your lips and continue with your worldly preoccupations - rather, hasten to your confessor, partake of the holy communion to derive strength, and start your spiritual struggle and fellowshiping with God.*

**(VI) Parable of the vinedressers (vs. 33 - 46)**

**""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. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" 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." 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'? "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet." (Matthew 21:33 - 46)*

### **V. 33:**

Christ summarized the entire history of the Jewish nation in this parable.

*"A certain landowner"* - He represents God, Who planted a *"vineyard"* - hence, the Jewish nation, Abraham's seed.

*"And set a hedge around it"* - This represents the commandments and the Mosaic covenant.

*"A winepress"* - This represents enduring suffering for the sake of serving God while adhering to His word. This is what the Jews had failed to achieve; Christ fulfilled it through His Cross, and traversed the winepress alone: *"I have trodden the winepress alone."* (Isaiah 63:3)

*"A tower"* - This represents the people's leaders and elders, on a tower, responsible for watching over the nation, and alerting people against enemy attacks. They include the tribe chiefs, the teachers, and all the people's leaders.

*"The vinedressers"* - Those represent the Jewish priests, in charge of caring for the vine, in order that it may yield holy fruit - hence, virtues, and a pure life in the hearts of Jewish believers.

*"And went into a far country"* - This means that, after having proclaimed

Himself clearly as a fire on the mountain top in the days of Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He disappeared out of sight of the people due to their preoccupation with sinfulness. Therefore, they could not see Him anymore - as though He were travelling in a far land.

**Vs. 34 - 36:**

*"His servants"* - He sent them to reap the fruit - those are the prophets and men of God, sent to His people throughout history, in order to reap virtuous lives from Jewish believers. Unfortunately, the Jewish priests and leaders resisted and tortured them: some were flogged, others murdered, and others stoned. Put differently, they rejected their teachings which were, in fact, the voice of God to them.

However, God was longsuffering and patient, and *"...he sent other servants, more than the first...."* meaning, even more prophets - but the priests resisted and rejected them just like the earlier ones.

**Vs. 37 - 39:**

The last chance, and the greatest deed, that God offered the Jewish nation, was the incarnation of His Only Begotten Son, for their salvation - according to the Old Testament prophecies.

In the parable, the vinedressers were fully aware that He was the Son of the vineyard's Owner, and the Heir to everything therein. However, instead of submitting to Him and giving Him the fruit, they rose up against Him and murdered Him.

Due to their greed and love of leadership and worldly acquisitions, the high priests refused to believe that Christ was indeed the awaited Messiah.

Instead of believing on Him, they resisted Him, to protect their worldly stature, and crucified Him.

This reveals how the priests' eyes were blinded by their pride and love of leadership - to the extent that they rejected the awaited Messiah, the Son of God.

**Vs. 40 & 41:**

Christ subsequently asked the scribes and Pharisees, who were among His audience, about what they thought would be an appropriate course of action for the landowner mentioned in the parable - what they thought he should do to the evil vinedressers....

They answered: *"He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."*

Eternal perdition is thus the fate of the Jewish priests who rejected Christ.

**"Other vinedressers"** - Those are the disciples and apostles, and members of the Christian clergy.

**Vs. 42 - 44:**

**"The stone"** - This refers to Jesus Christ. The building is the Church. The chief builder who chose that Stone is God.

**"It is marvelous in our eyes"** - According to the limited human perspective, Christ seems to hail from a lowly family, having neither wealth nor stature. In fact He is God, Who humbled Himself for our salvation. In order for us to accept Him, we need faith.

Christ reminded them of the prophecy given in Psalm 118:22, **"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."** The builders rejected that stone thinking it was useless - but they discovered that it was the most suitable stone to be the building's cornerstone - hence, to join the two walls. That stone refers to Christ, Savior of the Jews and Gentiles. He was sent by God - but the priests failed to understand this. Christ declared clearly to the chief priests that **"the kingdom of God"** which had been promised to His people, would be wrenched away from them due to their unbelief, and given to the Gentiles who believed on Him. Christ meant that Jewish unbelievers would be replaced by Gentile believers, in the Church of Christ.

Whoever resists Christ shall fall on, and be crushed by, the stone. Such people would face hardships, but would be accepted by God, upon their belief and repentance.

Whoever persists in disbelieving Christ, will be judged and sentenced to eternal perdition - meaning that they would be crushed by the stone falling upon them.

**Vs. 45 & 46:**

The chief priests and the Pharisees understood that the parable was about them. Rather than repent, they were indignant against Christ and tried to arrest Him. However, they feared the people, since they considered Him to be a great prophet.

+ *Do not resist others who identify your faults. Rather, hasten to repent, since they could be bearers of a Divine message.*

## Chapter 22

### Parable of the wedding - the Sadducees' beliefs - the greatest commandment

#### (I) Parable of the wedding (vs. 1 - 14)

*"And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, 'See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.' ' But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen.'"* (Matthew 22:1 - 14)

#### Vs. 1 & 2:

As usual, our Lord Christ presented spiritual concepts couched in parables, in order to facilitate his audience's understanding - that was due to the hardness of their hearts, leading to their tendency to reject His profound spiritual aphorisms.

*"A certain king"* - This refers to the Father.

*"A marriage"* - This refers to the Church, in which God is pleased to be united with His congregation, through their partaking of His holy body and blood. They are saved from their sins through baptism, repentance and partaking of the holy Eucharist.

*"His Son"* - This refers to our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Vs. 3 & 4:**

**"Sent out his servants"** - This refers to our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as all the prophets and Old Testament men of God, who proclaimed God to mankind.

**"Other servants"** - This refers to the disciples and apostles, and the New Testament clergy and servants; they call humanity to Church life, and to the Faith.

God respects man's free will; therefore God calls man to His Church - but does not force him. God prepared everything for us, and offered us His love; it is up to us to respond positively to Him.

**"They were not willing to come"** - This means that the Jews rejected the prophets' teachings, they strayed from repentance, and they did not believe in Christ.

**"My oxen and fatted cattle are killed"** - This refers to Christ's sacrifice on the Cross - to which the Old Testament sacrifices referred. This is the sacrifice of His body and blood, offered daily on the altar.

This could also symbolize the word of God which satiates the soul.

Finally, this could symbolize the lives of martyrs and saints, who offered their lives as a sacrifice of love to God, modelled after the crucified Christ. Their life stories satiate the believing soul with God's love, applied practically in their lives.

**Vs. 5 & 6:**

Unfortunately, the invitees responded badly to the king's invitation. They remained fully absorbed in material pleasures, symbolized by the **"farm"** and **"business."** Those represent the Jews, to whom the invitation for life with God was extended, but they remained preoccupied with material issues. Even worse yet, they mistreated the bearers of the king's invitations: they **"seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them."**

**V. 7:**

**"The king"** - This refers to God. The wickedness of the invitees angered the king, and he issued orders to have them destroyed - hence eternal perdition for rejecting the Faith - therefore, he had their city destroyed; that is precisely what transpired in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

**Vs. 8 & 9:**

**"The highways"** - Those are the crowded places.

**"As many as you find"** - The invitation is extended to all mankind.

The Jews rejected God's calling, although they were expected to set the

example, for the Gentiles, by accepting the Faith. God therefore directed His invitation to the whole world through His servants the disciples and apostles. Thus, they went forth to the four corners of the world inviting everyone to the Faith and to Christ's Feast - hence, His holy body and blood.

**V. 10:**

**"Bad"** - Those whose past lives were filled with wickedness that everyone could see.

**"Good"** - Those whose virtues were apparent to everyone.

Both groups needed belief on Christ, Christ's redemption, and repentance.

The disciples called all Gentiles - both bad and good, and regardless of the extent of the bad's wickedness, as long as they were prepared to repent.

They believed, abandoned their past lives, and joined the Church, believing on, and enjoying, Christ.

**V. 11:**

**"A wedding garment"** - The Church's forefathers agreed that the **"wedding garment"** in this parable referred to "love." Since the holy Bible tells us that **"God is love"** (1 John 4:8), anyone who does not love, does not know God, and cannot be accepted within the fold of the Church. By neglecting the garment of love, and depending on one's self-righteousness, one does not know God, and is slated for eternal perdition. In verses 34 - 40 (below) Christ confirms unequivocally that the greatest commandments are love of God and love of fellow humans. It should also be noted that Sacraments of Baptism, Penance and holy Eucharist, are necessary prerequisites for eternal life. Gentiles who had believed and joined the Church, had to maintain pure, godly, lifestyles, through continual repentance and love for fellow humans - hence, the **"wedding garment,"** qualifying their presence in Church on earth, ultimately extending to heaven.

**V. 12:**

On Judgment Day, the king - hence, God - will demand complacent believers for an explanation, as to why they had failed to love God and their fellow humans, especially their enemies.....He will also ask why they had failed to repent. Such evildoers will have nothing to say - since, at that point, it would be too late to repent....

**V. 13:**

Being complacent entails willingly allowing sin to dominate one's life. The penalty is being tied to those sins unto eternal perdition - due to rejecting the

freedom, and fellowshiping with God, offered by the Spirit.

The extent of the severe punishment awaiting such people is expressed by the *"weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

#### **V. 14:**

Thus, God calls everyone to the Faith - but few, indeed, are those who believe and remain steadfast in their faith, and are chosen for eternal life.

+ *The opportunity offered to participate in the Lord's Supper - hence, partaking of the holy communion - is unmatched. Let us not be diverted from it by worldly preoccupations, or by using our abundant sins as an excuse. The Sacrament of Penance offers forgiveness, regardless of the severity of our sins, or the length of time we had labored under them.*

*Let us not be complacent and ignore our sins. Rather, let us clothe ourselves with the appropriate wedding garment, and enjoy eternal fellowshiping with Christ.*

#### **(II) Paying taxes (vs. 15 - 22)**

*"Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. 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. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" 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." When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way." (Matthew 22:15 - 22)*

#### **Vs. 15 - 17:**

The *"Herodians"* were a political party aligned with Herod's family; they sought the continuation of that family's monarchy, under Roman authority. Normally, the anti-Roman Pharisees despised the pro-Roman Herodians. In this instance, though, they joined forces against our Lord Christ, trying to trap Him into committing an error.

Hypocritically, they flattered Christ, telling Him, *"You are true, and teach the way of God in truth."* Furthermore, they attempted to provoke Him by saying, *"You do not regard the person of men."* In this way they thought He would refuse paying the required tax to Caesar. Thus, they asked Him whether taxes should be paid to Caesar according to the Roman state's

requirements. If He agreed, He would be collaborating with the colonizers - thus stirring the Jews against Him; if He disagreed, He would be opposing the Roman state - thus deserving arrest and trial.

*"Caesar"* - This was the title given to the Roman sovereign - in Christ's days it was Tiberias Caesar.

**V. 18:**

Christ, Who knows the unknown, *"perceived their wickedness."* Thus, He told them, *"Why do you test Me?"* Simultaneously, He alerted them to their sin, namely, hypocrisy, so that they might repent and believe on Him, the Omniscient God.

Unfortunately, they were unmoved due to the hardness of their hearts.

**Vs. 19 - 22:**

Christ said, *"Show Me the tax money."* In those days, tax money was paid in Roman currency, namely, *"denarius"* - the standard Roman silver coin. Given that the local Jewish currency was the "shekel," producing a denarius could be construed as an indication that the Pharisees' carried only Roman currency, which may seem like allegiance to the Roman colonizing authority. This, in turn, would be inconsistent with their preaching sole adherence to the temple. Thus, fearing the authorities, they appeared to preach what they were not practising.

When Christ asked them for an example of tax money, they produced a denarius, which displayed the name and image of Caesar, the Roman sovereign. Upon asking them about the inscription on the coin, they said that it was Caesar's. He thus told them to give Caesar what pertained to him, namely, all the political dues required of a citizen of the Roman empire - since the state offered services to its citizens, the state, in turn, deserved taxes in return for those services.

However, the soul is much more important - and it should be given to God. Put differently, money is infinitely less important to a person than his soul. They were amazed at Christ's wisdom - since they were unable to pin on Him any fault. Regrettably, they neither believed nor repented.

+ *You were created in God's image - therefore submit to Him your heart and life. Do not become an image of Satan, through pride and love of nasty worldly pleasures. Regain your godly image, by repenting and adhering to God.*

**(III) The Sadducees' belief concerning marriage (vs. 23 - 33)**

*"The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, 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. Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her." Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, '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." And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching." (Matthew 22:23 - 33)*

**V. 23:**

The Sadducees were a wealthy, aristocratic, Jewish sect. Unlike the Pharisees, they denied the soul's immortality, bodily resurrection after death, and the existence of angels. Most of the chief priests were Sadducees.

**V. 24:**

The Sadducees invoked with Christ a section of the Mosaic covenant. This concerned a childless widow who, according to the law, could marry her deceased husband's brother or closest relative in order to raise offspring bearing the deceased husband's name. In this way, the family's heritage would be preserved. The ensuing firstborn would then be attributed to the deceased (Deuteronomy 25:6).

**Vs. 25 - 28:**

The Sadducees questioned Christ about a story they had invented, believing that it posed an unsolvable riddle. Namely, a childless widow had been married successively to each of seven brothers, and remained childless until her own demise in the end; if there were eternal life, then with which of the seven would she live eternally? Having had no children, the answer could not be that she would live eternally with the one from whom she had a child.

**Vs. 29 & 30:**

Christ alerted them to the fact that they had failed to understand the prophecies, being fixated on material issues, while failing to grasp the clear, spiritual, meaning and intent of heavenly, spiritual, life. In heaven there would

be no physical needs or marital relationships - rather, all citizens of heaven would be spirits attached to God, linked by feelings of love, with no differentiation on the basis of physical relationships - hence, immortal spirits, having profound, sublime, spiritual feelings, with no need for marriage or breeding children.

**Vs. 31 & 32:**

Our Lord Christ presented them with further evidence, which was not drawn from prophecies. Namely, God spoke to Moses saying, ***"I am....the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob..."*** (Exodus 3:6 & 15)

Clearly, God would not affiliate Himself with the worthless dead !!

God is great, affiliated with His children, the immortal spirits living with Him in heaven, whom we knew physically on earth, and who are now spiritually in heaven.

Christ cited that proof from Moses' pentateuch, since those constituted the Sadducees' primary reference, thereby ignoring most of the other Old Testament Books. God did not say *"I was the God of Abraham...."* rather, He is currently the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God said this to Moses, many years after the demise of those patriarchs. This means that their spirits are alive in heaven, and that He is their God. Therefore, physical death does not eliminate the spirit - as the Sadducees claimed.

**V. 33:**

Christ's audience was amazed at His sublime teaching, profound wisdom, and powerful aphorisms; furthermore, the Sadducees were trounced by His arguments. The multitudes consisted of Sadducees, Pharisees, and other Jews.

+ *Contemplate heaven's splendor and the spirits' glory therein. This will not only mitigate your immersion in material pleasures, but should also induce you to reject your sins, and to be more mindful of your spiritual life.*

**(IV) The greatest commandment (vs. 34 - 40)**

***"But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."*** (Matthew 22:34 - 40)

**V. 34:**

The Sadducees were defeated in their attempt to pin an error on Christ. They were even unable to debate His powerful arguments. For this reason, being staunch adherents to the law, the Pharisees conglomerated to test and ensnare Christ.

+ *The power of God indwelling you will silence the wicked, regardless of the extent of their tricks or evil. This is because God, Who is with you, is far more powerful than the forces of evil acting on humans.*

**Vs. 35 & 36:**

Lawyers were known to be meticulous in keeping and interpreting the commandments and the Mosaic covenant. A Pharisee, who was also a lawyer, asked Christ: which, in His view, was the greatest commandment. If Christ favored one over the other, He would be wrong, since all are God's commandments. They had likely heard Christ's Sermon on the Mount, where Christ had amplified and complemented the commandments - they could then accuse Him of saying that the Mosaic covenant was deficient.

+ *Do you speak innocently to others, or do you attempt to distinguish yourself or to accentuate their weaknesses?*

**Vs. 37 - 39:**

Christ summarized the ten commandments in two - without distinguishing one over the other. The first addresses man's relationship with God, and the second man's relationship with fellow humans. The first - and very important - commandment is to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind. The natural corollary is the equally important second commandment, namely, to love fellow humans as one loves oneself - this second one proves one's love of God.

Genuine love is to love others as one loves oneself. This is manifested even more sublimely in the New Testament, hence, loving others even more than loving oneself. Christ demonstrated this by giving Himself up on the Cross for our sake - He loved us and gave Himself up for us.

+ *Christ even went beyond giving Himself up for us - His overflowing river of love was such that He asked forgiveness, from the Father, for those who crucified Him, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." (Luke 23:34)*

**V. 40:**

Such love satisfies the law, commandments and prophetic teachings.

**(V) Christ and David (vs. 41 - 46)**

*"While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked*

*them, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?" They said to Him, "The Son of David." He said to them, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool" '? "If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his Son?" And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore."* (Matthew 22:41 - 46)

**Vs. 41 & 42:**

Christ patiently responded to all the Sadducees', Pharisees' and lawyers' questions, and to all their attempts at ensnaring Him - some of those were discussed in earlier chapters. They were overwhelmed by His powerful arguments. He finally demonstrated to them the error in which they had fallen - they were resisting the glaring truth before which they were impotent. He thus asked them a religious question, based on their studies of the law and prophets, namely: *"What did the holy scriptures say about the awaited Messiah - "Whose Son is He?"*" Without hesitation, they answered, *"The Son of David."* Everyone agreed that He would be of the seed of David, according to the prophecies.

**Vs. 43 - 45:**

*"How then does David in the Spirit call Him...."* This is in accordance with Psalm 110:1 - the Jews agreed that the author was David. *"In the Spirit"* means "through Divine inspiration."

*"The Lord"* - This refers to God the Father.

*"My Lord"* - This means "David's God and Master." It is impossible for someone to call his son or grandson "my Lord."

Put differently, Christ told them that, since He was the Son of David, how did David refer to Him in the psalm as "my Lord" - in Psalm 110:1 David did say, *"The Lord said to my Lord...."* That was in the context of a discussion between the Father and the Son, following Christ's redeeming death on the Cross, and the demons' submission to Him, having bound them by the Cross, and having attained His Divine splendour - referred to as the "right."

How could He be the Son of David, and the Lord of David simultaneously??

**V. 46:**

The Pharisees were perplexed and unable to respond, since they continued to regard Christ in the material sense. From a Christian's perspective, though, the answer is quite simple: Christ is the Son of David in the flesh and, at the same time, He is the eternal incarnate God.

Having realized their impotence, they withdrew in shame, and never resisted

Him again.

+ *God desires that you not resist the truth, that you repent, and that you love Him and live with Him. Obey the word of God and live accordingly.*

## Chapter 23

### The Pharisees' pride - feigned/ostensible worship

#### (I) Teaching and applying what is taught (vs. 1 - 4)

*Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers...."* (Matthew 23:1 - 4)

#### Vs. 1 - 3:

This is the last sermon Christ delivered to the multitude - subsequently, all His discussions were with His disciples. Christ endured all the resistance posed by the proud scribes and Pharisees. He responded to all their sly questions; He seized that as an opportunity to teach them, along with the multitude. However, having reached the final week of His life on earth, He desired to induce their repentance by exposing their faults - thereby also shielding the people from imitating them and falling into multiple sins. The scribes and Pharisees were meticulous in teaching the commandments and the law - which was the task God had entrusted to them.

However, their lifestyles deviated fully from the commandments. Therefore, Christ cautioned His disciples and the multitudes to obey the word of God, taught by the scribes and Pharisees, while taking great care not to adopt their evil lifestyles, since the Pharisees had neglected applying God's commandments.

#### V. 4:

*"They bind"* - Christ draws an analogy between the commandments and burdens that the Pharisees bundle together, demanding the people to carry.

*"Heavy burdens"* - Christ said that the Pharisees load the people with commandments, like farm animals made to carry heavy burdens. The animal may buckle under the heavy load - analogously, the people may be unable to satisfy the commandments' requirements.

*"But they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers"* -

This means they refuse to apply the least of its requirements.

Since the Pharisees never attempted to apply the commandments, their teaching became purely theoretical, and the demands - stemming from the commandments - which they placed on people's shoulders became heavy.

The commandments themselves were not difficult to apply, rather, they were

taught erroneously and in a convoluted fashion; thus, their approach was not conducive to application by the people. Furthermore, they had no experience in presenting the commandments, their gradual application, and overcoming obstacles.

*+ Do not teach anything that you have not applied in your life, and from which you have not derived benefits and experience. In this way, your words would be more effective - and you would have also learnt how to apply correctly what you are teaching. The upshot would be guiding people with practical principles, appropriate to surroundings and circumstances.*

## **(II) The Pharisees' pride (vs. 5 - 12)**

*"But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Matthew 23:5 - 12)

### **Vs. 5 - 7:**

Not only did the Pharisees fail to comply with the commandments, but they also sought to be honored and praised by people. The law stipulated that the commandments be written in small print on pieces of leather (called "*phylacteries*") to be positioned between the eyes - hence, they should be constantly in a person's mind and before his eyes. The Pharisees broadened them in order to appear more adherent to the commandments than others. Furthermore, God had ordered that His people's garments end with blue fringes, or tassels, to remind them of heavenly life. The Pharisees, on the other hand, had much longer fringes than everybody else's to indicate that they were holier. Thus, they rejected humility.

The material phylacteries clouded their minds and distanced them from the commandments. The lengthy tassels dragged them into pride, and impeded their march down the agonizing road of spiritual struggle - rather, they sought prominent places in feasts and synagogues. As they passed through crowded places, they expected to be saluted and praised, and hailed by high sounding titles, such as "sir" or "my lord." Such pride distracted them from loving God and following His commandments.

For this reason, Christ was consistently humble under all circumstances and occasions: hence, the wedding of Cana of Galilee, His tendency to remain inconspicuous, His washing of the disciples' feet,.....

+ *The extent of your humility will reveal to you God and His commandments, and will help you love Him. Conversely, seeking people's praise will distance you from His love, since you would then be loving yourself instead of Him.*

#### **V. 8:**

Christ cautioned His disciples against the love of leadership, authority, and men's praise. He demanded that they be humble, that they consider all whom they shepherd to be their brethren, and that Christ alone be the Shepherd and Teacher.

Christ did not use the terms "**Rabbi**" or "**Teacher**" in their literal sense. Rather, they refer to a proud and manipulative spirit since, naturally, the ranks of master, servant, leader, teacher and student are acknowledged in various societies. However, the ultimate "rabbi" is the spiritual teacher who derives his authority from Christ, and who teaches Christ's teachings - not his own. The holy Bible gives us proof, by telling us to be "**subject to the governing authorities**" since they represent the "**ordinance of God.**"

(Romans 13:1 & 2) Furthermore, St. Paul refers to himself as a father: "**For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.**" (1 Corinthians 4:15) He also refers to Onesimus as his son, hence, "**I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains....**" (Philemon 10) St. John the Beloved refers to his congregation as his children (1 John 2:1 and 3:18, and 3 John 4).

Concerning the title "sir," St. Paul readily reiterated what the Philippian jailer said: "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**" (Acts 16:30)

#### **Vs. 9 & 10:**

Christ instructed His disciples and their successors, hence, the bishops who would lead the Church and become its "fathers," not to call anyone "father" other than God - this means that they would be responsible for leading the Church. However this, again, must be taken in the spiritual, rather than the literal, sense. For example, a church father may call his confessor "father." Furthermore, humility calls for their learning from all the spiritual, as well as the biological, "fathers." Finally, the New Testament does appreciate and recognize the significance of teachers, hence, "**....he who teaches, in teaching....**" (Romans 12:7)

The essence of the message is that they should not assume authority and

teaching of their own selves - rather, solely through God's authority and word. Furthermore, they should not be led by fathers, such as heretics, whose teachings do not conform to Christ's or the Church's.

**Vs. 11 & 12:**

Finally, Christ clearly called them to be humble when dealing with each other; God glorifies whoever humbles himself, and despises and rejects the proud.

**(III) Hindering and offending others (vs. 13 - 15)**

*"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. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves."* (Matthew 23:13 - 15)

**V. 13:**

*"Hypocrites"* - This means that the scribes and Pharisees appeared to lead the people towards worshipping God whereas, in fact, they were distancing them from belief on Christ, and from conducting themselves in accordance with the commandments' spirit.

Through their pride, superficiality, and non-conformance with the commandments, the Pharisees had not only locked themselves out of the kingdom of heaven, but had also locked the people out, by rendering the commandments too difficult in their view. They loaded the people with heavy burdens, and offended them with inappropriate conduct - all of which distanced the people from eternal life.

**V. 14:**

*"For a pretense"* - This means "for personal reasons." They prolonged their prayers in order to induce people's trust, thus entrusting to their care the widows' money. Unfortunately, their dishonesty and greed led them to rob the widows for their personal gain.

The Pharisees' hypocrisy not only impeded others' eternal life, but also extended to their adherence to the appearance of prayer, while prolonging their prayers in order to win people's praise - rather than out of their love for God. Their hearts were so dominated by the love of money, that they exploited the weak, such as the widows, oppressed them, and robbed them of their money. Their preoccupation with pride and amassing wealth blinded them to the realization that they were exploiting and oppressing the weak.

#### **V. 15:**

*"You travel land and sea"* - This refers to the significant effort expended in attracting a person to the Jewish faith.

*"One proselyte"* - This refers to a pagan being admitted to the Jewish faith.

*"A son of hell"* - This is a person worthy of eternal perdition.

*"Twice as much"* - This refers to greater eternal torment because, after having known the Faith in God, and having been offended by the Pharisees, the person reverts to practicing his anterior sins in which he was immersed during his heathen life.

Because they failed to have Divine support, the Pharisees went to great lengths to convert wealthy, distinguished, pagans to the Jewish faith; after that person's conversion, he discovers the Pharisees' hypocrisy and strayness from the godly path. He thus becomes offended, and turns not only against them, but also against the Jewish faith, and God. Since he would have apostasized, his eternal torment would be greater than if he had not known the Faith.

+ *Beware of offending others because of your sins - you would then be giving a false impression of God and the Church. Do not be biased against, or for, any form of worship. Your worship should be offered as an expression of love for God. You would then win salvation and, spontaneously, you will win others for Christ.*

#### **(IV) The materialistic perspective (vs. 16 - 22)**

*"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it." (Matthew 23:16 - 22)*

#### **Vs. 16 & 17:**

The Pharisees' preoccupation with amassing wealth led them to teach that whoever swore by the gold he offers to the temple is obliged to fulfill what he had vowed. On the other hand, they taught that whoever swore by the temple, is not bound by that oath. How can that be possible, given that the temple is much more significant than the gold offered to it?? Nevertheless, their preoccupation with money led to teaching such corrupt principles.

**Vs. 18 & 19:**

*"The altar"* - This refers to the altar overlaid with brass, situated at the temple's entrance on which the congregation offered sacrifices. The Pharisees also taught that, while swearing by the gift was binding, swearing by the altar was not. In this way they could reap the sacrifices offered as material gain for themselves - thus neglecting worship, and neglecting to encourage worshippers to keep their vows towards a godly life.

**Vs. 20 - 22:**

Essentially and logically, swearing by anything implicates swearing also by everything it embodies. The Mosaic covenant permitted oaths, as long as the oath was truthful and binding on whoever made it. The Pharisees, though, broke the commandment addressing oaths, by clinging to their material profits.

Our Lord Christ alerted them to the spirit of a given oath: namely, an oath meant swearing in the name of God, the Owner of altar, temple, and heaven. How, then, could they possibly ignore God, focusing on material profits, and promulgating interpretations never intended by God??

In the Old Testament, the intent of God's commandment pertaining to oaths, was the edification of His people's faith in Him, while shielding them against swearing by pagan idols.

+ *Do not interpret God's words in accordance with your personal interests. Submit to God and do not trick yourself. God's blessings will thus be manifested in your life.*

**(V) The appearance, and literal application, of worship (vs. 23 - 28)**

*"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."* (Matthew 23:23 - 28)

**V. 23:**

The scribes and Pharisees took great care to tithe using the unimportant herbs, grown in small quantities in people's homes' gardens. Examples included mint, anise and cummin - this made them appear meticulous in everything. Since Jewish leaders profited from collecting those tithes, they neglected the essence of a relationship with God, namely, truth, mercy and faith.

Christ does not reject tithing - even in minor matters. However, we should understand the spirit of the commandment, rather than its literal interpretation; hence, we should tithe believing in God's blessing, in mercy for the needy, while adhering to God - Who is the Truth. Throughout our lives, we should conduct ourselves in mercy, truth and faith. We should not follow the example of the scribes and Pharisees, whose cruel hearts were exposed as they oppressed the weak and widows, and rejected belief on Christ.

*"These"* - This refers to tithing in everything.

*"The others"* - This refers to adherence to mercy, the truth, and the Faith.

**V. 24:**

Christ described them as "blind," because they refused to see the truth in Him, and remained fixated on trivial issues, which Christ likened unto gnats (a gnat is a small insect comparable to a mosquito.) At the same time, they neglected the essence of the commandments, which Christ likened unto a camel. Thus, they filtered the water and wine to ensure they are free of gnats since, according to the law, gnats were unclean. Nevertheless, despite this scrutiny, they ignored significant sins, such as arresting Christ and crucifying Him, despite His innocence.

**Vs. 25 & 26:**

The Pharisees' hypocrisy was more evident than their other sins. They ensured the appearance of meticulous worship - while their hearts remained steeped in evil. Therefore, Christ alerted them to the importance of cleaning the interior, not merely the exterior, of the cup and dish - which could be achieved by distancing themselves from all personal defilements. The food and drink they reaped through greed and evil would never clean the vessels' exterior - the hearts must be purged. Furthermore, Christ referred to the Pharisees as "blind," since they failed to see the essence of the issue, being fixated on appearances.

**Vs. 27 & 28:**

In Numbers 19:16 & 18, the Mosaic covenant stipulates that a person would

be defiled by touching a dead person or a dead person's tomb. For this reason, Jews whitewashed their tombs so that passers-by would be alerted and avoid touching them. Christ likened the hypocritical Pharisees' life unto beautifully whitewashed tombs, whose external beauty hides their internal filth and rottenness, resembling the wickedness in the Pharisees' hearts: while their appearance was meticulous worship, their hearts were cruel, and their conduct evil.  
+ *Ensure that your repentance, love of God, and love for fellow humans, are sincere, and let your deeds and worship be a true expression of your good heart.*

**(VI) Resisting the truth (vs. 29 - 32)**

*"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt." (Matthew 23:29 - 32)*

**Vs. 29 & 30:**

Christ also admonished the Pharisees for resisting the truth while feigning righteousness. Although they built and decorated prophets' tombs, and proclaimed their rejection of their fathers' wickedness and mistreatment of those prophets, their deeds were just as wicked as their fathers': they resisted the righteous men of God, who were greater than prophets in their generation, namely, John the Baptist and Christ Himself.

**Vs. 31 & 32:**

The Pharisees' discussions then proved that they were *"sons of those who murdered the prophets."* Furthermore, their then current wickedness in resisting Christ and His disciples confirmed their hypocrisy and their deceptive righteousness; their hearts were steeped in evil. In essence, through their deeds, they filled the cup of evil created by their fathers until it overflowed. They would eventually be sentenced to eternal perdition.  
+ *Encourage goodness and support it with all your heart and energy - you will then become a child of God. God is pleased with everything leading to goodness.*

**(VII) The Divine punishment (vs. 33 - 39)**

*"Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of*

*hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous bloodshed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"*  
(Matthew 23:33 - 39)

**V. 33:**

*"Serpents"* - Our Lord Christ used this analogy because of the Pharisees' convoluted modus operandi, and their insistence on evil-doing.

*"Brood of vipers"* - This was because their fathers were wicked - they tortured and murdered the prophets of olden days.

All the earlier sins merit hell fire. They cannot be exonerated by any appearance of worship or feigned righteousness.

**V. 34:**

God continued to do good with the Jews, despite their wickedness. He sent them messengers, whom the Jewish rabbis labelled prophets, wise men and scribes, in order to proclaim God's message calling for repentance. However, due to the Jews' insistence on evil, they rose up against God's messengers flogging, torturing, expelling, and even murdering, them.

*"Synagogues"* - Those existed in all Jewish towns for the purpose of reading and preaching, as well as for sentencing anyone accused of evil deeds or contravention of Mosaic law.

**V. 35:**

In the end, God will condemn them for resisting the truth, and for refusing to heed His voice, by murdering His innocent men, starting with the first martyr in history, *"the....righteous Abel"* up till *"Zechariah, son of Berechiah"* John the Baptist's father. It is believed that Zechariah was martyred when he took his child John to the temple, in order to rescue him from troops seeking to kill him; ultimately the child was rescued by God's angel, and the father murdered.

Thus, the Jewish nation is depicted as one person, whom God punishes for

the blood of the Old Testament, pre-Christianity, martyrs.

+ *Know that God is the Just Judge. Do not prolong your selfishness or oppression to others, regardless of your authority or your logical arguments. Repent humbly, and rectify your faults - you will then receive His mercies.*

**V. 36:**

That Divine punishment took place, hence destruction of Jerusalem, during the then current Jewish generation, in 70 A.D. at the hands of the Roman general Titus.

**V. 37:**

Christ likened Himself unto a hen which embraces its eggs until they hatched, producing new life; the mother hen's feathers fall off in the process of granting life to the new chickens. Similarly, Christ suffered and died for us. He offered His love to the sons of the prophets' murderers. However, they rejected His teachings which purposed their salvation. They even rose up against Him and crucified Him.

**V. 38:**

The priests', scribes' and Pharisees' wickedness rendered the temple spiritually desolate. Christ subsequently abandoned it, withdrawing His blessings from it. The Romans eventually destroyed it in 70 A.D.

**V. 39:**

A few days following that discourse, Christ was crucified and the Jews never saw Him again, because, after His resurrection, He appeared to a few people, namely, His disciples plus some believers. On the other hand, Jews who would believe and convert will rejoice on judgment day at Christ's Second Coming, and cry: "***Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!***" (Psalm 118:26) Similarly, the disciples and all believers will rejoice at Christ's Second Coming, uttering the same jubilant cry. Thus, all believers on Christ will join the apostles' jubilation feeling that Faith has led them to be indwelt by the blessed Christ.

## Chapter 24

### Signs of Jerusalem's destruction - the Second Coming

#### **(I) Destruction of Solomon's temple (vs. 1 & 2)**

*"Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.""* (Matthew 24:1 & 2)

Solomon's temple was magnificent. Attempting to please the Jews, king Herod had taken great care to beautify and expand it. It was built of huge stones, some of which were overlaid with shiny metal plates.

As the disciples admired the temple's structure, pointing out its splendor to Christ, He told them that it would be utterly destroyed. This transpired in 70 A.D. at the Romans' hands, due to Jewish insurgence.

+ *The temple's destruction signaled the emergence of a new temple, namely, the Church, founded on the blood of Christ. In order for God to establish His temple within you, your old person must perish - hence, your old tendency towards evil. This would be achieved through the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance.*

#### **(II) The emergence of false messiahs (vs. 3 - 5)**

*"Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.""* (Matthew 24:3 - 5)

#### **V. 3:**

Our Lord Christ sat with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, close to Jerusalem, from which location they had a clear view of the temple.

The disciples asked Christ about the timing of the temple's destruction, the timing of His Second Coming, and the signs heralding His Second Coming so that they may be ready.

Thus, Christ's response covered two issues: Jerusalem's destruction and His Second Coming. It should be noted that the two events are linked, since they both purpose people's repentance and preparedness.

The Jews had thought that their temple would last until end times, while the disciples believed that its destruction would be at the end.

**Vs. 4 & 5:**

Christ alerted them to the emergence of false, deceptive liars, each one claiming to be the "messiah," or the messiah's "emissary." Those must be scrutinized and evaded. We should reject anyone whose teachings are inconsistent with the Church's or the holy Bible's.

*+ Do not embrace any teachings outside the Church - even if the "teacher" happens to be well-known. Remain steadfast in your Church and its teachings. By adhering to prayers, and to submission to your spiritual fathers, you will discover the insidious deceptions in strangers' teachings.*

**(III) General disasters (vs. 6 - 8)**

*"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows."* (Matthew 24:6 - 8)

**V. 6:**

Satan will provoke people against each other, thus giving rise to divisions and wars, ultimately, so that people may hate each other. Satan will thus manipulate them and divert their preoccupation towards problems instead of worshipping God - people will be filled with fear and anxiety.

*"See that you are not troubled"* - Do not be perturbed by such news - rather, expect them, and pray so that God may support you, grant you peace, and protect everyone caught amidst those wars.

*"The end is not yet"* - Those wars should remind you to be prepared for the last days - but they do not constitute the final sign preceding Judgment Day.

**V. 7:**

In addition to divisions and wars, Christ gives another sign, namely, scarcity of food and drink - meaning famines, causing many to perish. Subsequently, Satan will spread diseases, such as pandemics, in order to terrify people and distance them from God. Other signs, causing people to rebel against God, include earthquakes and unusual natural phenomena.

**V. 8:**

All those signs will recur several times - but they are only the beginning of

hardships. There will be more signs preceding Christ's Second Coming.  
+ *Do not be perturbed when faced with hardships. Trust your God's omnipotence, and His ability to protect you against Satan's wars. God will transform your material trials into growth in your spiritual life. Simply, cling to God through prayers and honesty throughout your life.*

#### **(IV) Particular hardships (vs. 9 & 10)**

*"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another."* (Matthew 24:9 & 10)

#### **V. 9:**

In addition to the general disasters through which Satan attempts to induce people's rebellion against God, Satan stirs up hardships against God's children, in the form of persecutions because of their Faith. They wind up losing physical rest, and even being exposed to torture - unto death. In this way, Satan tries to distance them from God - or even to apostacize.

#### **V. 10:**

Persecutions which God's children encounter could lead some of them to apostacize, or to turn against their brethren, thus aligning themselves with evil-doers to persecute believers, ultimately delivering them to wicked rulers, to punish and murder them. Schisms and hatred thus develop between the apostates and their brethren the believers; their persecutions to believers may even be more severe than persecutions promulgated by non-believers.  
+ *Focus on your Christ, Who endured much suffering unto death; this would help you accept hardships for His sake. Be not perturbed by resistance from those closest to you; rather, remain steadfast in your love for God and for them. Pray for them, in order that they may return to the Faith, confident of God's support and that any subsequent trials are solely through His permission.*

#### **(V) Deceptions (vs. 11 - 14)**

*"Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."* (Matthew 24:11 - 14)

**V. 11:**

The third strike which Satan aims against God's children, following the general and particular hardships mentioned earlier, is straying them away from the truth, through the emergence of "*many false prophets.*" Those are people pretending to be God-sent, or people spreading philosophies and beliefs meant to steer people away from God while introducing doubts about the Church, leading, ultimately, to their falling in various lusts.

**V. 12:**

Being distanced from God and immersed in various lusts weakens people's love of God - they become carnally inclined, leading non-spiritual lives.

**V. 13:**

On the other hand, a few will remain steadfast in the Orthodox Faith, rejecting the pressures of doubts and deception. Whoever endures in steadfastness, proclaiming his faith and love, will receive eternal salvation.

**V. 14:**

In order to eliminate all of man's possible excuses, God made the call to the Orthodox Faith available to all mankind, such that the evangelical message reaches all, prior to Christ's Second Coming. Thus salvation becomes available to all.

*+ Do not be influenced by strange teachings or meetings outside the fold of the Church. Scrutinize your friendships in order to maintain your Orthodox Faith.*

**(VI) The abomination of desolation (v. 15)**

*"Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand)...."* (Matthew 24:15)

It should be noted that Jerusalem's destruction is the essence of Christ's discourse, given in verses 15 - 22.

*"The abomination of desolation"* - This refers to the presence of defilement in the holy place, namely, Jerusalem and its great temple. Such defilement heralded Jerusalem's imminent destruction. This was prophesied in Daniel 9:27. Jerusalem's defilement materialized upon being besieged by the Roman army bearing their stone idols. That, in turn, heralded its imminent destruction because, subsequently, the army destroyed the city, and demolished the temple.

*"Whoever reads, let him understand"* - Christ knew that the Bible would

be written and read by Christians. Thus they needed to flee Jerusalem before its destruction and its inhabitants' perdition. That did materialize, and the Christians escaped death.

This verse could also be symbolic of the presence of the antichrist in the holy place - the temple - defiling it with his wickedness, and followed by many who had been deceived; thus, let the reader understand that Judgment Day is approaching.

+ *When you see the signs of end times, such as wars, pestilences and persecutions, know that your life on earth is unstable, and be prepared for your eternity. Flee sin, in order to live with God.*

#### **(VII) Fleeing Jerusalem (vs. 16 - 20)**

*"...then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath."*

(Matthew 24:16 - 20)

#### **V. 16:**

Christians, within Jerusalem and in surrounding Judean regions, should flee to neighboring mountains, upon observing the besieging armies, in order to escape death by the Roman army. In fact, those who did remain in Jerusalem were murdered in large numbers by the Roman general Titus' army.

#### **V. 17:**

Anyone on the rooftop who sees the Roman army approaching from afar, should escape with his life quickly, without attempting to recuperate his belongings.

#### **V. 18:**

Field laborers should hasten forward without returning even to fetch their clothing.

#### **V. 19:**

Pregnant and nursing women will experience much difficulty in escaping to the mountains.

#### **V. 20:**

May this destruction, and the escape therefrom, not occur in winter, since

rains would flood the roads and impede the escape. May it also not occur on a Sabbath, so that people may not be in violation of the law, by dragging belongings - also incurring the risk of being caught by Jewish police. Considering all the above from the spiritual perspective, it symbolizes fleeing evil quickly to the mountains - which symbolize being elevated with God above the world's level, refraining from lapsing into anterior lusts and pleasures, and seeking God's help to support our weaknesses in carrying this world's burdens and anxieties.

+ *Let us hasten our flight, giving our soul's salvation the highest priority, and relinquishing material acquisitions, in order to attain the kingdom.*

### **(VIII) The great tribulation (vs. 21 & 22)**

*"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened."* (Matthew 21 & 22)

#### **V. 21:**

The Roman Titus' attack on Jerusalem was violent - more than one million Jews perished, in addition to those killed in the surrounding regions of Judea. Such destruction in that part of the world was unprecedented.

*"Such as has not been....nor ever shall be"* - This means that Jerusalem had never before experienced, and will never again experience, such brutal destruction.

This also symbolizes the great tribulation which the world will experience prior to Judgment Day. It will be unprecedented, and will never recur.

#### **V. 22:**

God intervened, and Jerusalem's siege lasted only five months, so that some of its inhabitants might be saved - God's intervention permitted Christians to flee to the mountains as He had told them.

This applies also to end times. Satan's persecution of God's children will intensify, in order to force them to apostacize. Not only will Satan render it very difficult to obtain the necessities of life, but he will also cause some to be tortured and killed.

However, God will shorten that period because of His love, and because of His desire to retain His children's unwavering and steadfast faith. God permits hardships to the extent of His children's endurance; He helps them overcome such trials by resorting to the Church, and through fervent spiritual worship, thereby securing their salvation.

+ *Rest assured that God will never allow your exposure to trials beyond*

*your endurance limits. He will support you throughout your trials, and will even make them a motive for you to be closer to Him. Rest assured that the hand of your heavenly Father, the Omnipotent God, is managing your life such that you are shielded against any harm.*

**(IX) The Second Coming is proclaimed to all (vs. 23 - 28)**

*"Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false Christ's and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together." (Matthew 24:23 - 28)*

**Vs. 23 - 25:**

Here, Christ alerts His children to the emergence of imposters pretending to be Him, while feigning righteousness, and promulgating strange teachings, purposing to lead believers astray. Believers should steer clear of such imposters and reject any teaching foreign to the Church's. Those imposters may even perform miracles - since Satan is capable of performing miracles - but they are useless miracles. As long as a person remains obedient to the Church's and forefathers' teachings, there should be no fear of straying.

**V. 26:**

Among the avenues of deception, is the misguided notion that Christ's Second Coming will only be evident to a small number of people in an unknown place, such as a certain desert, or in a closed location to a select group. Christ warned that His Coming would be proclaimed to all mankind simultaneously.

**V. 27:**

Christ likened His Second Coming unto lightening, appearing vividly and suddenly in the heavens, and seen by all from east to west. Consequently, people do not need to advise each other of Christ's Second Coming.

**V. 28:**

There are several possible interpretations for this verse.

It could refer to Jerusalem's destruction; hence, the "*carcass*" could refer to

the Jewish nation which, having distanced itself from God, became as a dead person to Him. The Romans descended upon it, like "*eagles*," bearing their emblem - which was an eagle.

The verse could also apply to end times, when the "*eagles*," hence, angels, descend upon evil-doers, hence, the "*carcass*," to proclaim God's wrath against them and cast them into eternal perdition.

Finally, the "*carcass*" could refer to the crucified Christ, offered as flesh and blood daily on His Church's altar. There, the saints will gather in their heavenly life, as "*eagles*" soaring in the heavens.

Thus, at Christ's Second Coming, His children will gather and rejoice around Him, through the angels, and, conversely, evil-doers will cluster around Satan in eternal perdition.

+ *If you were as the eagles, God's children, then your place would be around Christ in His Church - there you will find lasting joy and peace.*

#### **(X) Nature's collapse (v. 29)**

***"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken."*** (Matthew 24:29)

In this verse, Christ speaks of end-time events. The sun and moon will cease to shine, and the stars will fall from the heavens. Nature in its entirety will be perturbed. At that point, Christ will appear to judge the world. These signs will be accentuated by the appearance of Christ in His powerful light. The sun and moon will appear dark compared to His shining light. Everything in nature will seem worthless.

From the spiritual standpoint, the darkened sun and moon refer to the dwindling knowledge of God, to the Church's persecution during the antichrist days, and to the generalized apostasy. The truth will become shaky and even non-existent in many people's view.

This applies to anyone distancing himself away from God. His mind and soul become dimmed, his talents and abilities fall, and his entire being is shaken as a result of his immersion in worldly and material pleasures.

+ *As you encounter trials and anxieties in your life, hasten towards God seeking His guidance and protection. You will regain your serenity, regardless of the severity of surrounding perturbations.*

#### **(XI) Christ's Second Coming (vs. 30 & 31)**

***"Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather***

*together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."* (Matthew 24:30 & 31)

**V. 30:**

Christ resumes His discourse about Judgment Day. Following nature's collapse, "*the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven*" - this is the Cross, glorious and illuminated. "*Then*" all the non-believers and non repentants will grieve and tremble because, not only had they rejected belief on the crucified Christ, but they also crucified Him time and time again throughout their lives by being immersed in wickedness; they will weep in hopeless regret.

Christ Himself will then appear in "*power and great glory*" "*on the clouds of heaven.*" This is because we are used to the clouds referring to God's presence, as was the case with Moses, and during the Transfiguration. Christ's appearance in all His glory is completely different from His first humble image projected during His incarnation.

**V. 31:**

God's angels will appear instantly, bearing the trumpets of triumph and jubilation; they will gather, from the four corners of the world, all God's faithful children, to reign forever with their Christ. The angels will not only gather the celestial citizens - the saints - but also all those who would have led a heavenly lifestyle on earth.

+ *Great and joyous indeed is that day for God's children. Let us be prepared with repentance and with the utmost scrutiny, bearing life's suffering in order to be glorified with Him.*

**(XII) Parable of the fig tree (vs. 32 - 34)**

*"Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near-- at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place."* (Matthew 24:32 - 34)

**Vs. 32 & 33:**

Christ gave a parable, whereby a fig tree which appears barren during the winter, provides an indication of the arrival of summer, when it becomes laden with foliage, flowers and fruit.

Analogously, materialization of the signs mentioned in verses 5 - 15 would be an indication of Jerusalem's imminent destruction.

+ *An increase in the evil and hardships you may be enduring, signals approaching relief and God's glorification through you.*

**V. 34:**

**"This generation"** - One generation spans about 30 - 40 years. Jerusalem's destruction occurred forty years after Christ had foretold it. Some of His audience were alive at the time - an example is St. John the Beloved. Christ specifies the timing of those signs, namely, the generation of His audience - His intent being Jerusalem's destruction in 70 A.D. Christ was also referring to the spread of the Faith in all the known parts of the world at that time - as well as believers' preparation for the eternal kingdom.

**(XIII) Timing of Christ's Second Coming (vs. 35 & 36)**

***"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only."*** (Matthew 24:35 & 36)

**V. 35:**

Christ confirmed the truthfulness of His words and the certainty of those events' occurrence. Christ's words are more certain than anything known to humans. Even the firm ground on which we stand, and the sky above our heads, will evanesce on Judgment Day, making way for God's words, and for Him to take His children to His kingdom. **"Heaven"** symbolizes the spirit's destination, while **"earth"** refers to the body's repository. This means that, over the years, humans will die but, in the end, those signs and Christ's Second Coming will materialize.

**V. 36:**

We should not be preoccupied with attempting to determine the time of Christ's Second Coming. He will never proclaim it, even to His angels, so that people do not become complacent in their struggle and spiritual preparedness, and also so that people may not live in constant terror, thus paralyzing their spiritual progression.

+ *Since God will neither proclaim the time of His Second Coming, nor the time of your demise from this world, you must be prepared each day through repentance, prayer, and loving others.*

**(XIV) Preparing for Christ's Second Coming (vs. 37 - 41)**

***"But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of***

*Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left."* (Matthew 24:37 - 41)

**Vs. 37 & 38:**

An analogy is drawn in these verses between our current lifestyle, as we prepare for Christ's Second Coming, versus the lifestyle prevailing in Noah's days before the flood, when everyone was preoccupied with their daily chores, without giving any thought for repentance and their relationship with God. Today, many people are focused on worldly tasks with no concern for their souls' salvation.

**V. 39:**

The flood occurred suddenly and, being unprepared, people perished. Similarly, Christ's Second Coming will be sudden; salvation will only be for those prepared through a life of repentance.

**Vs. 40 & 41:**

Humans will be mingling, either throughout their family life, or their daily activities. While a subset will be preparing for their eternity, the rest will be preoccupied with worldly issues, totally rejecting repentance. Therefore, *"one will be taken"* to heavenly glories, *"and the other left"* to be cast into eternal torment.

*+ Do not be preoccupied with material issues, since that is not your life's primary goal; your goal is loving God. Therefore, strengthen your relationship with Him through prayers, fasts and spiritual literature. In this way, when the last hour surprises you, you will be at peace, glorifying, and unutterably joyful.*

**(XV) Parable of the master of the house and the thief (vs. 42 - 44)**

*"Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* (Matthew 24:42 - 44)

**V. 42:**

Our Lord Christ resumed His discussion about being prepared for the kingdom, explicitly emphasizing the importance of spiritual vigilance. This involves alertness to the soul's salvation through repentance, daily self examination, and engaging in spiritual activities. Collectively, those foster our growth in God's love, leading to love, forgiveness and service to those around us.

The reason for focusing on the importance of vigilance, hence, being constantly prepared, is that we do not know the time of His Second Coming.

**Vs. 43 & 44:**

*"The thief"* - This could refer either to "death," or the sudden Second Coming of the Son of man.

Once more, our Lord emphasizes the importance of being prepared, since He did not, and will not, specify the time of His Second Coming. He likened this unto the thief (death) who would rob a home during the night, while its occupants are asleep. If the master of the house knew the timing of the thief's coming, he would have protected his house from being robbed.

+ *Be very careful not to be enticed by Satan into believing that worldly lusts and pleasures are urgent and necessary. You will then be surprised by Judgment Day, and be unable to do anything.*

**(XVI) Parable of the faithful servant (vs. 45 - 51)**

*"Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (Matthew 24:45 - 51)

**V. 45:**

Christ offers another parable, namely, a master who tasks one of his servants to be responsible for the needs of all the other workers in the house; the master is then absent for a certain period. Christ then poses a question, namely, "Who would qualify as *"a faithful and wise servant?"* The answer is that it is the servant who gives food to all the household at the appropriate

time.

**"That servant"** - This refers to every Christian, father, mother, or servant, responsible for serving or shepherding others.

**"Faithful"** - This is the servant who discharges his duties perfectly.

**"Wise"** - This is the person who is consistently prepared for his eternity through spiritual vigilance.

**"His master"** - This refers to Christ.

**"His household"** - This refers to all the souls around a given Christian or servant, entrusted by God to his spiritual care.

**"Food"** - This refers to spiritual shepherding, including various material and psychological needs.

**"In due season"** - This means "at the appropriate time - when the need arises.

#### **Vs. 46 & 47:**

Christ praises the servant who discharges all his duties perfectly during his master's absence. That servant is rewarded and appointed to oversee the master's entire property.

This symbolizes the importance of everyone's care for their soul's salvation, and for satiating their spirit and body by a living relationship with God. Equally important is serving surrounding people and attracting souls to Christ. The reward is to be exalted to heaven, to know God, and to enjoy constant fellowship with Him.

**"The master.....will come on a day"** - This refers to Christ's Second Coming on Judgment Day.

**"Will find so doing"** - This refers to the servant's constant faithfulness, spiritual alertness, and preparedness for eternity.

**"Assuredly"** - This is a confirmation of the significance of the ensuing proclamation.

**"All his goods"** - This refers to knowing God in eternity and enjoyment of fellowship with Him.

#### **Vs. 48 & 49:**

The unfaithful servant will conduct himself wickedly after being appointed steward over the entire household. Instead of catering to everybody's needs, he mistreats everyone, believing that his master would delay his arrival; he becomes absorbed in satisfying his own material pleasures, represented by food, drink and drunkenness.

**"That evil servant"** - This refers to the Christian or servant who neglects his relationship with God, becoming immersed in evil pleasures.

**"Delaying his coming"** - This refers to the person neglecting preparation

for the Day of the Lord, with the pretext that life is quite long, allowing immersion in pleasures.

**"Beat his fellow servants "** - This refers to cruelty and oppression when dealing with others.

**"Eat and drink with the drunkards"** - This refers to immersion in material pleasures and lusts.

**Vs. 50 & 51:**

**"The master"** - This refers to God.

**"That servant"** - This refers to the selfish person, fully absorbed in his corrupt pleasures, lacking love towards others, and neglecting preparation for his eternity.

**"Will cut him in two"** - This means "the master will destroy him."

The master will arrive suddenly without warning, and will see the extent of his servant's unfaithfulness in discharging his duties. He will then destroy him and cast him with the evil **"hypocrites,"** in eternal torment, where there will be **"weeping and gnashing of teeth"** - hence, extreme suffering and helplessness. That was because he had feigned being God's steward in caring for himself and others, while, in reality, he was corrupting himself and mistreating others.

+ *Scrutinize the responsibilities, as well as the souls, in which God placed you, in order to attract them towards Him. Then question yourself about the extent of your faithfulness in spending your time, your talents and all your capabilities - have you used them for the glorification of God, or for satisfying your personal interests, and deviation towards evil?*

*Do you pray seeking salvation for yourself, as well as for those around you?*

## Chapter 25

### Parables of the virgins and the talents - deeds of mercy

#### (I) Parable of the virgins (vs. 1 - 13)

*"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 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.' 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. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." (Matthew 25:1 - 13)*

#### V. 1:

*"The kingdom of heaven"* - This refers to God's heavenly reign over His children's hearts within the Church's fold, in preparation for the eternal kingdom.

*"Ten"* - This number refers to all believers on Christ.

*"Virgins"* - This refers to all souls believing on Christ.

*"Their lamps"* - This refers to a person's life being enlightened by ensuring that his physical and spiritual capabilities are dedicated to living with God.

*"The bridegroom"* - This refers to God.

Thus, they all believe, and their goal is eternal life, hence, presence with the Bridegroom forever. However, they differ in the extent of their preparedness for the kingdom of heaven.

#### Vs. 2 - 4:

*"Five"* - This number could symbolize a person's five senses: they could be used for good, like the wise virgins, or ceded to evil, like the foolish ones.

*"Wise"* - They had the appearance and depth of righteousness, symbolized by the oil in their lamps.

**"Foolish"** - Those are the ones whose life had only the appearance of being spiritual - but they lacked the "oil" which symbolizes the love of God and service to others.

"Foolishness" is inherent in a person who is capable of enjoying fellowship with God in this life and the next, yet is complacent, languishing in worldly preoccupations.

**V. 5:**

**"They all slumbered and slept"** - This refers to death - end of life. The lives of those virgins ended, and they died prior to Christ's Second Coming.

**V. 6:**

**"At midnight"** - This refers to Christ's Second Coming, after the souls' repose, at which point His just judgment would be proclaimed, rewarding those who had fallen asleep shrouded in faith, and punishing those who had been swallowed by the evil world's darkness.

**"A cry"** - This refers to the angels' final sound of trumpets, calling believers to salvation, and evil-doers to condemnation.

**"Go out to meet him"** - Bodies of the reposed will change; their decomposed bodies will be reconstituted, and they will become spiritual bodies united with their spirits, in order to meet Christ, and stand before Him on Judgment Day.

At Christ's Second Coming, the bodies will rise, and all humanity will assemble on Judgment Day.

**Vs. 7 - 9:**

All the virgins came forward - hence, all humanity - to stand before God, the just Judge. Each person collected all he had, from faith to love - meaning, each person ensured that his lamp was functional, before giving account for himself before God.

At this point, the foolish virgins realized that faith without love - hence, oil - is worth nothing....and the lamps are extinguished. This is because faith without works is dead, since, **"even the demons believe - and tremble!"** (James 2:19) - but they will not be saved.

The foolish virgins tried to borrow oil from the wise ones, but the latter declined that request, saying there would be insufficient oil for all, and that the former should go and buy oil from **"those who sell."** This symbolizes offering love and mercy to others. The reason is that, regardless of the volume of good deeds a person may undertake, good deeds can never "overflow" and be transferred to others. In this respect, our Lord Christ's aphorism is quite clear: **"...when you have done all those things which**

*you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.""* (Luke 17:10)

*"Those who sell"* - This refers to any beneficiary of our merciful deeds, such as the poor and needy.

#### **V. 10:**

The foolish virgins tried to undertake merciful deeds, and do good on Judgment Day - but they had already missed their opportunity. Christ had already taken the wise virgins into His kingdom, *"and the door was shut."* Hence, there was no possibility for anyone to enter subsequently.

*"The wedding"* - This refers to the eternal kingdom.

*"The door was shut"* - This means that the eternal presence of the wise virgins in the kingdom was guaranteed, that evil-doers and Satan had no possibility of entering, and that the righteous would encounter no hardships in the kingdom.

Put differently, being away from God, leaves no chance for evil-doers to escape eternal torment.

#### **Vs. 11 & 12:**

*"Afterward"* - This means that it was too late, and they had already been condemned.

*"Open to us"* - This refers to seeking a place in the kingdom.

*"I do not know you"* - This means "I do not recognize you as My disciples or followers."

The foolish virgins attempted to enter after the door had been shut, but Christ refused, and even said that He did not know them. Put differently, He had no relationship with them, since they had merely the appearance of righteousness, but lacked its power and depth; this means that they had faith with no deeds of love.

Whoever does not lead a life on earth within God's love, has no chance of enjoying God's love in heaven.

#### **V. 13:**

Our Lord Christ emphasizes quite clearly the importance of spiritual watchfulness, hence, constant preparedness for His Second Coming, since we do not know its time.

*+ God expects your practical love, manifested in your holy worship, and in good deeds with everyone you encounter. Therefore, seize all*

*opportunities throughout your life to do good deeds as much as possible.*

*Your life on earth will thus be enlightened, and you will not be apprehensive of Judgment Day.*

**(II) Parable of the talents (vs. 14 - 30)**

*"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. 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. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. 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.' 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.' 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.' 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.' 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. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' 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. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. 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. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" (Matthew 25:14 - 30)*

**Vs. 14 & 15:**

*"Travelling"* - Christ's ascension has left humans to struggle spiritually throughout their lifetimes on earth, until His Second Coming.

*"His goods"* - This refers to capabilities Divinely granted to each individual; humans are entrusted with those capabilities, as God's stewards, and will be accountable for them on Judgment Day.

*"To each according to his own ability"* - This refers to all capabilities a

given person can use. God gives generously to all. No one is given capabilities beyond their means. In this way, no one should panic or appear inadequate.

**"Immediately he went on a journey"** - Thus means that he left humans to utilize their capabilities freely throughout their lives.

God likened Himself unto **"a man,"** and likened humans unto **"his own servants."** He gave them talents, hence money, for investment. He was then absent for an unspecified period of time.

God-given talents differ from one person to another. Some receive more than others. Each person will be accountable to God for what they had received. No one should boast of what they had, and no one should envy others for what they had received. The significant issue here is investing our God-given talents, honestly, regardless of their magnitude.

#### **Vs. 16 & 17:**

The one who had received five talents **"traded with them, and made another five talents."** This could be interpreted to mean that, in addition to his five external senses attuned to the outside world, he developed internal senses geared towards perceiving and heeding the voice of God.

Concerning the servant who received two talents, it is worth noting that in "worldly terms," the number "2" refers to "relationships," including spousal relationships. Thus, when that servant traded with his two talents, he **"gained two more also."** This could refer to doubling his love, encompassing God and all fellow humans.

#### **V. 18:**

The last servant, receiving the single talent, symbolizes the selfish person, caring only for himself, and being too lazy to offer love to God or anyone. Thus, he **"dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money."** This symbolizes his immersion in worldly pleasures and lusts, aiming to satiate his personal desires, while completely neglecting the fact that the talent he had, was God's property, entrusted to him by God.

+ *Each one of us is steward over his own life, because our lives belong to God, Who purchased us with His blood. We are thus required to live for Him, honestly investing all our God-given talents and capabilities.*

#### **V. 19:**

**"After a long time"** - This refers to the opportunity of a long lifetime given by God to each person, to enable him to invest his talents towards the glorification of His holy name.

At this life's end, we will have Judgment Day, when servants will be held accountable to their Master.

**Vs. 20 & 21:**

***"He who had received five talents came and brought five other talents."***

His master thus praised him, and described him as ***"good,"*** because he had led a life of love for God and humans. He was also ***"faithful,"*** because he had invested all his energy and realized a profit of 100%. His reward for his faithfulness on earth, which is ***"a few things,"*** was life in the kingdom, where he would enjoy great blessings, referred to as ***"many things."*** This meant that he would live in eternal joy, with God, his Master and heavenly Father. This means that each one of us will be held accountable for each God-given talent entrusted to us, and which we are expected to invest.

***"Well done"*** - Such words of praise coming from God can never be surpassed.

**Vs. 22 & 23:**

The second servant, like the first, had invested and doubled his talents. Therefore he was also described as ***"good and faithful,"*** and was rewarded by entering the kingdom.

**Vs. 24 & 25:**

The third servant was evil and selfish, for having fallen into laziness and neglect. Furthermore, he incurred other sins, hence, not only did he fail to invest his talent by loving God and humans, but also he abused his Master, hence, God, by falsely accusing Him of being ***"a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed."***

The truth is quite the opposite. Sin, which starts by laziness and neglect, could mushroom into more significant sins leading, ultimately, into the person's loss of spiritual vision.

Furthermore, that servant lied by saying, ***"I was afraid;"*** he never feared God, and he never struggled spiritually - rather, he was immersed in worldly pleasures.

**Vs. 26 & 27:**

***"Wicked and lazy"*** - Our Lord Christ exposed the real reason for the servant's failure to trade with his talent, namely, his laziness and wickedness. Christ used that servant's own words to condemn him; He thus told him, "If I were indeed harsh and greedy, you should have traded with the talent and reaped a profit" - this symbolizes investing our capabilities in loving God and

humans.

*"The bankers"* - The intent here is offering love to others.

Bankers are specialized in monetary matters - thus, symbolizing counsellors and spiritual fathers. They provide spiritual guidance as to how our capabilities may be used for the glorification of God.

*"Interest"* - The intent here is winning souls for Christ through doing good.

### **Vs. 28 & 29:**

God's first punishment was stripping him of his talents. Then He gave his talent to the one who had five talents, thus confirming that God will grant even more talents to whoever loves Him faithfully. On the other hand, whoever is unfaithful and lacks love for God and humans, is unworthy of whatever talents he had, and God will strip him of them.

### **V. 30:**

The *"unprofitable (evil) servant"* is punished by being cast into eternal torment, expressed as *"outer darkness"* - hence, away from God. *"There will be"* acute grief and extreme pain, expressed as *"weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

+ *God's blessings to you will increase if you utilized all your talents. Do not neglect any beneficence or time granted to you (talents) - so that God may not deprive you of your eternal inheritance.*

### **(III) Christ's Second Coming - merciful deeds (vs. 31 - 46)**

*"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' Then He will*

*also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'* (Matthew 25:31 - 46)

### **Vs. 31 - 33:**

Following Christ's discourse about His Second Coming, symbolically depicting Himself as the soul's Bridegroom, or as the servants' Master, He speaks clearly, in this excerpt, of Judgment Day, when He would come as a Judge in great glory. In this case, He would be quite different from the weak image in which He lived on earth, since His birth in the manger up till His crucifixion. He will come with His angels, *"then He will sit on the throne of His glory"* to judge the whole world - for their deeds everywhere and at all times. His angels will segregate humans, dividing them into two groups: the righteous will go on His right, and the evil on His left. It is worth noting that, "right" symbolizes "blessings and power," while "left" refers to "shame and debasement."

God will differentiate between them as easily as a shepherd distinguishes his sheep from his goats. Sheep are usually tamer and more obedient to the shepherd than goats.

It is clear from Christ's words that, on Judgment Day there will be only two groups: the righteous and the wicked. In other parables they were labelled *"wise and foolish virgins,"* or *"faithful and unfaithful servants."* Here, they are labelled *"sheep and goats."* Hence, there is no "third" category as some people claim - there is no third group where evil-doers are punished temporarily prior to joining the righteous.

### **V. 34:**

Christ the King describes believers as *"blessed"* children of His Father. Put differently, He proclaims fellowshiping with them in love, and that He is the Firstborn among many brethren - thus, He calls them *"blessed of My Father"* and welcomes them to inherit His kingdom, that He had prepared for them prior to their creation, to enjoy being in His presence forever.

**V. 35:**

Christ enumerates all the merciful deeds that the righteous had done, rendering them worthy to inherit the kingdom of heaven; Christ said that merciful deeds done to others were tantamount to being done to Himself. He then mentions feeding the hungry and thirsty, materially and spiritually, as well as caring for strangers and hosting them. Such care does not merely satisfy needs; rather, it imparts psychological solace to resume life in the new place.

+ *Welcome strangers wherever you encounter them, and make them feel comfortable. Open the path for everyone, in order to be satiated with Christ, our true nourishment.*

**V. 36:**

Christ also mentions clothing the naked, whether materially, or in Christ's righteousness through a virtuous lifestyle. In sickness, a person senses his weakness, and is affected by the feelings of love from those who visit him. That would be a suitable opportunity to talk to him about God.

The most difficult situation is that of visiting prisoners - those who have lost their liberty and the chance of seeing their loved ones. Thus, they rejoice when loved ones visit them. We offer them Christ who never abandons them - even when fully isolated, in jail, from everyone.

**Vs. 37 - 40:**

In these verses Christ clarifies how merciful deeds are in fact transferred directly to Him; He does that through an illustrative discussion He has with the righteous. Hence, feeling unworthy of His praise, they ask Him humbly, "When did we see You hungry....thirsty....a stranger....?" He responds saying that all merciful deeds they had done, were offered to Him personally. That not only constitutes a significant Divine recognition for merciful deeds, but also represents a proclamation that they are the summit of love, and our key to inherit the kingdom.

*"The least of these"* - This refers to the weak and needy.

**V. 41:**

On the other hand, Christ calls the evil-doers on His left, and tells them that they deserved the Divine curse and eternal torment - although they should have ended up in the kingdom that He had prepared for them. However, they had declined to respond positively to His love. Thus, He casts them away from Him, and deprives them of His love which they had rejected. They would then spend eternity in hell fire, *"prepared for the devil and his angels"*

(those are the demons)." Put differently, they become like demons, due to their rejection of God's love.

**Vs. 42 & 43:**

Christ proclaims that their eternal torment is due to their selfishness, apathy towards others, and refusal to cater to others' various needs.

**Vs. 44 & 45:**

The wicked do not understand how or when they had failed to help God under various circumstances. Christ then proclaims that He was embodied in the needy and weak, to whom the wicked had refused to offer merciful deeds.

**V. 46:**

Christ confirms that Judgment Day is the end. It represents the righteous' destiny to enjoy the kingdom eternally, and the wicked's destiny to eternal torment.

*+ Now is the time to seize the opportunity to repent, to be empathetic towards others, and to do merciful deeds to everyone around you, and to everyone you encounter. Capitalize on those opportunities before the awesome Day of the Lord.*

## Chapter 26

### The Passover - the Lord's Supper - Christ's arrest and trial Peter's denial

#### (I) The Passover and the Cross (vs. 1 & 2)

*"Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, that He said to His disciples, "You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.""* (Matthew 26:1 & 2)

*"All these sayings"* - This is in reference to Christ's discussion with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, when He had foretold the signs of Jerusalem's destruction, as well as the signs for end times. As mentioned in Chapters 24 and 25, Christ had also discussed preparedness, faithfulness and merciful deeds.

*"After two days"* - This is in reference to Friday.

*"The Passover"* - This is the greatest Jewish feast. It started in Egypt, and means the *"passing over"* of the forces of destruction, sparing the firstborn of the Israelites, while killing the Egyptians' firstborns. The details are given in Exodus 12.

Our Lord Christ had prepared His disciples' hearts for accepting His suffering and death for them, then His resurrection for cleansing them of their sins. Having entered Jerusalem and discussed preparedness for eternity, He alerted His disciples to the imminent Passover - which was precisely two days hence. Slaughtering the Passover lamb was intimately linked to their liberation from bondage in Egypt. It also symbolized Christ's death on the Cross, to liberate the world from the bondage of sin. For this reason, Christ told His disciples that the time had come for His crucifixion and death - for their sake.

It would seem that the matter was too difficult for the disciples to absorb. They had not realized that it would indeed materialize two days hence. Through God's grace, they would endure the extenuating forthcoming hours.  
*+ God desires to shield you against evil, provided you clung to Him, and believed on His omnipotence. Thus, Satan can never harm you. Rather, God will transform all hardships for your benefit and spiritual growth.*

#### (II) Plotting to arrest Christ (vs. 3 - 5)

*"Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.""* (Matthew 26:3 - 5)

**"The chief priests"** - This is in reference to the actual high priest, plus former ones - because the Romans used to dismiss and replace chief priests. That was in addition to the twenty-four clerical division leaders.

**"The scribes"** - They were responsible for transcribing and teaching the Holy scriptures.

**"The elders of the people"** - Those were the leaders - members of the Sanhedrin (see Chapter 5:21 & 22).

**"The palace of the high priest"** - The Sanhedrin members met in Caiaphas' palace - the high priest - since, had they met in the temple, the people would have found out the reason for the meeting.

The Jews' religious leaders were represented by the chief priests, the scribes and select elders; those leaders' embitterment increased, as the multitudes abandoned them, favoring Christ, having been attracted by His teaching and miracles. Therefore, they assembled in Caiaphas' palace, to prepare a plot for ridding themselves of Christ. They agreed to have Christ arrested in a sly fashion, to avoid stirring an uproar among the multitudes who loved Him; they also decided not to have the arrest on a great feast, such as the Passover, because the crowds could impede realization of their wicked plan. However, they changed their minds when Judas Iscariot offered to deliver Christ covertly. That was Divinely permitted, so that redemption would be realized on the Passover Feast, since the Passover symbolized Christ. Furthermore, the millions assembled for that feast would witness Christ's death and resurrection, and spread the good news of salvation.

+ *Through your sins, you abuse Christ, and you cause His arrest and crucifixion; the Church reminds you of this fact each Wednesday, so that you may repent, and renounce participation with the evil-doers who arrested Christ.*

### **(III) The woman who poured fragrant oil (vs. 6 - 13)**

***"And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor." But when Jesus was aware of it, He said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.""*** (Matthew 26:6 - 13)

**Vs. 6 & 7:**

For the last time in His life on earth, Christ came to Bethany; there, a man named Simon, invited Him to his house. He was labelled the "leper," likely because Christ had healed him from leprosy.

A woman who loved Christ, and who sought to express her love, purchased a flask of expensive fragrance, went to Simon's house, and poured the fragrance on Christ's head. According to John 12:3, that woman was Mary, Lazarus' sister. She lived in the same village, was an avid listener to Christ's teaching, and was well-known for her love of Christ. Neither St. Matthew nor St. Mark mentioned her name - likely, fearing Jewish persecution. However, having written his gospel long after Jerusalem's destruction, John must have felt that such a consideration was immaterial.

In her desire to express her love for Christ, that woman signaled the existence of a few believers, having love-filled hearts, amidst numerous evildoers who would clamor, a few days hence, for His crucifixion. Analogously, the Church, today, is consistently thankful to Christ for His care, bounties, and miracles.

*".....alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head"* - In those days, expensive fragrance was bottled in small, high-priced, bottles. Pouring fragrance on a person's head was the custom, to express love and respect - especially for loved ones, or distinguished personages. This incident was also recorded in Mark 14:3. On the other hand, St. John stated that she poured it on Christ's feet - likely, as was the custom, she also poured some on His head. While Matthew and Mark recorded this incident two days before Passover, in his account, St. John mentions that that incident took place six days before the Passover Feast (John 12:1), hence, prior to Christ's Passion Week. This incident shows that, despite the betrayal by one disciple, some humans existed, such as Mary, who did love Christ. This incident is completely different from another event recorded by St. Luke (Luke 7:37 & 38), whereby a sinful woman poured fragrance over Christ during His evangelism in Galilee - that was in the house of a Pharisee also called "Simon."

*+ Seize the opportunity, today, of offering your love for Christ through prayers and lauds - this could be your last chance....*

**Vs. 8 & 9:**

The disciples, plus all others present in Simon's house, witnessed this great love offered to Christ. Instead of feeling remiss in expressing their love as Mary did, they started reproaching her. The one who publicly rebuked her was Judas Iscariot - but none of the other disciples - that was because he

was the treasurer, and he stole from the treasury (John 12:4 - 6). His words, though, stirred up the disciples and others present, such that they considered her expression of love to indicate unwise waste. In their view, they believed that, rather than pouring it over Christ, *"this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor."*

In this way, they attempted to conceal their shortcomings in expressing love, giving the apparently logical pretext of caring for the poor. In fact, Judas' intent was evil: he was planning to rob the treasury of a large portion of that money.

*"Sold for much"* - The price of three hundred denarii was recorded in both Mark 14:5 and John 12:5. That represented a very large sum of money.

+ *Do not criticize anyone spending a long time praying, visiting holy places, or participating in spiritual retreats; quite the contrary, follow their example. That could be a message for you to offer, like them, love for God.*

### **Vs. 10 & 11:**

Mary was silent, but Christ defended her action, confirming her great love. At the same time, He did not negate His teaching about loving the poor (as elaborated in the previous chapter.) The poor, though, are present at all times, while Christ's days on earth were numbered.

Here, Christ's tenderness should be emphasized. Despite His knowledge of Judas' wickedness, and that he was motivated by his love of money rather than his concern for the poor, He neither rebuked him nor reproached others. Furthermore, He praised Mary, and supported them in offering love for the poor as long as they lived. He gave Judas a chance to repent from his evil intentions, but, regrettably, he ignored that chance, and continued with his plan to betray Christ and sell Him to the Jews.

### **V. 12:**

Christ praised Mary a second time, saying that her love was expressed in the fragrance poured over His body that would die on the Cross; it was tantamount to spices for embalming the body - thus confirming the expression of love. That used to be the Jewish custom for treating bodies of the departed, by way of showing respect. Today, several nations continue to observe this custom.

### **V. 13:**

Christ added that such great love would be recorded in the Bible, to be preached over the entire world, in order to teach His children the importance of offering Him pure love, by way of giving thanks and responding positively to His love. Christ's foretelling of the Bible's worldwide spread, with that event

recorded therein, proves His Divinity.

+ *Rest assured that the love you offer Christ will be proclaimed to all humanity, on Judgment Day. That proclamation will last forever. May this be a motive for constantly worshipping God, and showing mercy to others, regardless of the cost or effort you may incur.*

#### **(IV) Judas' intent to betray Christ (vs. 14 - 16)**

*"Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?" And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver. So from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him.""* (Matthew 26:14 - 16)

*"The chief priests"* - Likely, those were the Sanhedrin members assembled in the high priest's palace (see verse 3).

*"Thirty pieces of silver"* - This is equivalent to "thirty shekels of silver" (equal to 360 grams.) That was a very small sum compared to what Mary would have spent for the fragrance. That sum was also the price of a slave! Judas Iscariot was the treasurer - thus, he was responsible for the pot of money from which Christ and His disciples spent for their needs. Some of Christ's followers used to donate in that pot. Unfortunately, Judas robbed it due to his love of money, and his failure to be attracted to Christ's love, teaching and miracles, which he had witnessed. Having been disappointed in realizing his material greed, by ruling with Christ in an earthly kingdom, he sold Christ - the most precious Person before him, to acquire the money to which he had been enslaved. He seized the opportunity of the Jewish leadership's wickedness, and offered them his services, namely, to deliver Christ to them in exchange for a sum of money. They accepted gladly, since that would enable them to arrest Christ without risking an uproar. He accepted their offer of a very small sum of money, namely, *"thirty pieces of silver,"* that being the most precious thing in his view.

+ *It is truly amazing, that the disciple should rebel, while the woman's love is expressed in pouring fragrance on Christ. The disciple even went further by selling his Master for the sum paid to purchase a slave!! Therefore, do not be perturbed by someone betraying you - they have done that to your Master, Jesus Christ. Rather, endure, for Christ's sake, and He will support and compensate you. Pray for the traitor, perchance he should repent.*

#### **(V) Celebrating the Passover (vs. 17 - 25)**

*"Now on the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, "Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?" And He said, "Go into the city to a certain*

*man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, 'My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.' ' ' ' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. When evening had come, He sat down with the twelve. Now as they were eating, He said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.' And they were exceedingly sorrowful, and each of them began to say to Him, 'Lord, is it I?' He answered and said, 'He who dipped his hand with Me in the dish will betray Me. The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.' Then Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, 'Rabbi, is it I?' He said to him, 'You have said it.'"' (Matthew 26:17 - 25)*

**Vs. 17 - 19:**

*"The first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread"* - According to the Greek translation, *"first"* means *"before"* - which is the word used in John 1:15 (this is when John the Baptist referred to Christ as *"...preferred before me..."*) This leads to the conclusion that our Lord Christ instituted the Passover one day before the Jewish Passover, which is also labelled *"the Feast of the Unleavened Bread,"* since, according to the law (Exodus 12:8 & 11) unleavened bread must be eaten with the Passover. Thus, at the time that Jews were celebrating their Passover, Christ was being crucified - since He is the true Passover, symbolized by the slaughtered lamb offered by the Jews.

The Passover Feast approached, and every Jew would celebrate it with his family at his home. It is clear, though, from the disciples' question about where they should prepare for it, that Christ did not have a particular home. Our Lord Christ presented a new concept for the *"family."* Members would no longer necessarily be related biologically - rather, spiritually. Thus, the twelve assembled, with Christ as the Head of the family - or Head of the body, which is the Church. He dispatched them to a specific person, believed to have been St. Mark the apostle. Christ thus celebrated the Passover in St. Mark's house, where household members prepared the Passover with the disciples in accordance with Jewish law. This symbolized the crucified Christ, Who would offer Himself for the life of the entire world the following day, namely, Good Friday.

*"My time is at hand"* - This was in reference to Christ's approaching Passion and crucifixion - to take place the following day.

*"They prepared the Passover"* - This is in reference to the slaughtered lamb and the accompanying bitter herbs - plus all the necessary cups and dishes according to Jewish law.

### **Vs. 20 & 21:**

**"Evening"** - This refers to the period 3 - 5 p.m. which is the time for consuming the Passover according to Jewish law (this is mentioned as **"twilight"** in Exodus 12:6).

Christ ate the Passover with His disciples - including Judas Iscariot (the traitor who would deliver Him to the Jews). Christ had a Fatherly heart towards him, caring for his salvation. Thus, He gently told the disciples that one of them would deliver Him to the Jews, without mentioning his name, giving his conscience a chance to prod him into repentance.

The following events occurred on Thursday:

1. Preparation of the Passover.
2. The disciples' dispute about who was the greatest (Luke 22:24).
3. Eating the Passover.
4. Washing the disciples' feet while they ate the Passover.
5. Christ's declaration that one of the disciples would betray Him.
6. The Lord's Supper and the institution of the Holy Eucharist Sacrament.
7. Christ's informing the disciples that they would abandon Him and that Peter would deny Him.
8. Christ's farewell speech and prayer - mentioned in John 14 - 17.
9. Chanting a hymn and exiting the city.
10. Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.
11. Christ's arrest.

+ *God sends you numerous warnings and messages, gently, prodding you to repentance. Do not ignore His tender love - lest you should lose your life away from Him, like Judas.*

### **Vs. 22 & 23:**

The disciples were distressed to learn that one of them would betray Christ. In order to eliminate any doubts they might have had concerning themselves, He gave them a sign about that disciple's identity - which also alerted Judas, for the second time, that he should repent. The sign was that the traitor would dip his hand in Christ's dish. Regrettably, Judas did dip his hand in Christ's dish, but failed to take the hint. The disciples, too, were so sorrowful that they did not notice either, and they did not speak to Judas.

It is worth noting that, in St. John's gospel we read that Jesus said, ***"It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it."*** Then Jesus ***".....gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon."*** (John 13:26) Since it was a Jewish custom for the host to give a piece of bread to the honored guest, it may be inferred that giving bread to Judas (according to St. John's account) was a sign of love and honor from Christ to Judas. Once again, Judas failed to seize that opportunity to repent.

**V. 24:**

Christ alerted Judas for the third time, saying, "*...woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born* (due to the severity of his eternal torment)." Christ then confirmed that, of His own free will, He would be delivered to the Jews, and He would die, through the betrayal of one of His loved ones, according to the Psalmist's prophecy: "*Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me.*" (Psalm 41:9) Christ made that proclamation in order to console the disciples that He would do that for the sake of humanity's, and their, salvation. Nevertheless, He warned Judas, giving him an opportunity to repent and recant.

**V. 25:**

Judas never recanted. Rather, his hypocrisy drove him to ask Christ audaciously, "*Rabbi, is it I* (who would deliver You?)" Christ's response, "*You have said it,*" was tantamount to a third warning. Traditionally, that was also a Jewish expression indicating agreement. The love of money continued to blind Judas. The disciples also failed to react, being blinded by their sorrow and amazement that one of them would betray Christ.  
+ *As long as you continue to have the opportunity, hasten, today, to repent and confess. Failing to capitalize on that opportunity, will lead to your loss, someday, of the need to repent, regardless of any Divine warning.*

**(VI) Institution of the Holy Eucharist - "Thanksgiving" - Sacrament (vs. 26 - 30 )**

*"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."* (Matthew 26:26 - 30)

**Vs. 26 - 28:**

It should be noted that the term "*Eucharist*" is derived from a Greek word meaning "*thanksgiving.*" Hence, the "*Sacrament of Holy Eucharist*" may also be referred to as the "*Sacrament of Thanksgiving.*"

Having eaten the Passover with His disciples, Christ instituted the Sacrament of Eucharist/Thanksgiving, hence, He gave them His holy body and blood. He took bread and blessed it, transformed it into His body, and

gave them to eat, proclaiming that it was indeed His true body. He also took the cup and transformed the wine therein into His blood, proclaiming that it would be shed for all mankind on the Cross.

Thus, Christ granted the Church the greatest of sacraments - that of the Holy Eucharist - hence, Communion. This permits us to unite with Christ across the ages - not only seeing Him as His contemporaries did, but also touching Him, having Him indwelling, and uniting with, us, and enabling us to live through Him. By consuming Christ's body and blood, we unite with each other, and become members in His body - which is the Church.

**"As they were eating"** - This means that, since the Passover symbolized Christ, He instituted the Sacrament of Thanksgiving immediately after they had finished eating.

**"Bread"** - Since they were, in fact, one day before the Jewish Passover, the bread was leavened - not unleavened. For this reason, the Church offers leavened - not unleavened - bread on the altar; this is also because Christ bore our sins, symbolized by the leaven - He died on the Cross, wiping out our punishment.

**"The disciples"** - They represent the New Testament's Church. For this reason, during the Divine Liturgy's rite, the celebrant divides Christ's body into twelve parts, representing the twelve disciples, around the mid-section, called the "*spadikon*," or the "Lord's part," thus symbolizing Christ amidst His congregation, or Christ the head of the Church.

**"My blood"** - This was symbolized, in the Old Testament, by the blood of animals - since, "**...according to the law....without shedding of blood there is no remission.**" (Hebrews 9:22).

**"The new covenant"** - Covenants, in olden times, were confirmed by bloodshed, through animal slaughter - as was the case with Abraham (see Genesis 15:9 - 19).

**"For many"** - That was a proclamation that Christ's redemption was for the entire world. All who believe, and partake of Christ's blood, are absolved from their sins.

**"The remission of sins"** - This is a confirmation that sins are forgiven through the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, combined with the Sacrament of Penance.

## **V. 29:**

In this verse, Christ proclaims a new fact to His disciples and to all believers, namely, that He would not celebrate the Sacrament of Thanksgiving anymore on earth. Put differently, He would not, anymore, transform the wine into His blood, until He drinks it with His children in the eternal kingdom - but in a new fashion conforming to their spiritual existence. In other words, our

love, union and growth in the knowledge of Christ in the eternal kingdom will not be through consuming bread and wine transformed into His body and blood, rather, through union with Him in a spiritual fashion suited to our existence in heaven.

**V. 30:**

*"When they had sung a hymn"* - The Jewish custom was such that they chanted Psalms 115 and 116 after consuming the Passover. After the disciples had chanted that praise, Christ had a long talk with them, then prayed His intercessional prayer given in John 14 - 17.

The psalms and lauds they chanted were, naturally, suitable for the occasion of the Sacrament of Thanksgiving - which is analogous to the hymns of praise chanted during administration of communion in the Divine Liturgy. Christ subsequently went out with the disciples to *"the Mount of Olives"* - adjacent to Jerusalem, where they were accustomed to spend quiet times together; this time, the purpose was bidding them farewell prior to His death. + *In addition to giving you sermons and guidance, Christ will give you the power to apply them, namely, His body and blood of which you partake; they will unite with you and act within you so that you may follow His teachings. His most difficult commandments will thus be facilitated through His power. Therefore, ensure that your partaking of the Holy Communion is regular - since that is the greatest power on earth that can shield you against Satan's wars, and that can foster your daily growth in the knowledge of God.*

**(VII) The disciples doubt Christ (vs. 31 - 35)**

*"Then Jesus said to them, 'All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.'" Peter answered and said to Him, 'Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble.'" Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.'" Peter said to Him, 'Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!'" And so said all the disciples."* (Matthew 26:31 - 35)

**V. 31:**

As they walked towards the Mount of Olives, Christ revealed to His disciples a bitter fact, namely, that they would doubt He was indeed Christ the Saviour. The reason is that they were fixated on the notion that His reign would be terrestrial, which was inconsistent with His impending arrest. The Old Testament prophecy would thus be fulfilled, namely, *"Strike the Shepherd,*

***and the sheep will be scattered.***" (Zechariah 13:7)

Nevertheless, Satan's strike against Christ by crucifixion was transformed by Christ into a strike against Satan, by binding him through the Cross, and gathering all His children for their redemption and salvation.

***"The Shepherd"*** - This refers to Christ.

***"The sheep"*** - This refers to the disciples.

#### **V. 32:**

Despite the bitter truth of the disciples' doubting Christ - and the fact that they were the closest to Him - He would fulfill their salvation on the Cross - He would die, He would rise from the dead, and He would appear to them in Galilee where they used to walk in the fields. Thus, once more, Christ encouraged them, saying that He would rise. Unfortunately, they failed to grasp the meaning of His words. In Chapter 28:7 & 10, Christ repeated to them that He would appear to them in Galilee following His resurrection.

+ *Our tender God loves you despite the weakness of your faith. He encourages you through His words and bounties. Therefore, remain steadfast during hardships, confident of His support and clear manifestation in your life.*

#### **Vs. 33 & 34:**

Peter's human emotions drove him to declare his steadfast faith in Christ, regardless of circumstances, and even if ***"all are made to stumble."*** Christ, though, pointed out to him that, due to his weakness, he would not endure the difficult circumstance of Christ's arrest and eventual execution.

Furthermore, on ***"this night"*** Peter would deny Christ not once, but three times, before the cock crowed - thus confirming the weakness of Peter's human nature.

Peter's declaration shows his love for Christ; simultaneously, though, it reveals his misguided impulsiveness and pride, in assuming that his faith's steadfastness is greater than others'.

#### **V. 35:**

Peter confirmed his adherence to Christ even unto death - ***"and so said all the disciples."*** Christ, though, did not respond, leaving them to realize for themselves the extent of their weakness. Hence, when the difficult moment of His arrest had arrived, they all fled and left Him (see V. 56).

+ *Seek the Holy Spirit's help - He will support you and maintain your faith's steadfastness throughout your trials.*

**(VIII) Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (vs. 36 - 46)**

*"Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." Then He came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then He came to His disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand." (Matthew 26:36 - 46)*

**Vs. 36 - 38:**

*"A place"* - Likely, that was a garden whose owner was known to Christ - Christ used to go there with His disciples.

*"Over there"* - Likely, that was not far from the garden's entrance.

*"The disciples"* - Those were eight disciples - hence, the twelve minus Judas who had left earlier, plus Peter, James and John who accompanied Him inside.

*"Even to death"* - This expresses the significant extent of His sorrow - extreme sorrow could lead to death.

Our Lord Christ arrived, with His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, in Jerusalem's vicinity - it would seem that they were used to meeting in that location. The name *"Gethsemane"* means *"oil press."* He left His disciples to meditate, or pray, and went forward with His three closest ones, namely, Peter, plus James and John the sons of Zebedee. The high spiritual standing of those three was such that Christ could reveal to them His feelings; *"Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death."*

The cause of that sorrow was that, being all-righteous, He would bear the sins of the entire world - how could righteousness co-exist with sin?!

It was indeed painful for both soul and spirit, not to mention His grief for the

Jews who would reject and crucify Him, as He continued to seek their salvation.

He asked His three disciples to pray, and to persevere in vigilance and prayer.

Despite the disciples' affectedness, they could not quite understand the essence of Christ's sorrow, since the Holy Spirit had not yet enlightened them to understand the salvation being offered to them.

That was a confirmation of Christ's humanity: He felt a psychological need for His close friends, the disciples, to pray with Him in the garden - especially the three closest ones.

#### **V. 39:**

Subsequently, not wishing to distress them further by seeing the extent of His sorrow, Christ left the three disciples and went to pray in solitude. He felt the difficulty of the cup of His Passion: physically, through the Cross and death, psychologically, since all would forsake Him, and, above all, spiritually, for having to bear the sins of the world, being all-righteous. This provides further confirmation of His humanity, since He suffered physically and psychologically. In order to show the extent of His obedience and submission to the Divinity within Him, He spoke with the Father saying, *"Not as I will, but as You will."*

*"Fell on His face"* - This teaches us the rite of prayer, prostration, mortification and submission before God, during trials, so that He may support us by His grace.

*"O My Father"* - This is a proclamation of the importance of God's Fatherhood during prayers - His Fatherhood would support us in hardships.

*"This cup"* - This refers to the sufferings that He would endure.

+ *You have the right to cry out to God in all your trials, and ask for whatever you need. However, you must hasten to add "Thy will be done," indicating submission of your life to Him. You must then leave Him and, being the tender Father, He will choose what is best suited for you, and support you.*

#### **Vs. 40 & 41:**

*"The disciples"* - This refers to Peter, James and John.

*"One hour"* - Metaphorically, this refers to a short time - not necessarily sixty minutes.

After having prayed in solitude, Christ returned to the three disciples, and found them asleep - out of sorrow and exhaustion. He woke them up to pray, after gently reproaching them for falling asleep, directing His remark to Peter:

*"What? Could you not watch with Me one hour?"*

Thus, Christ accentuated the importance of prayer coupled with spiritual vigil - this would protect us against falling into Satan's temptations and sins. Christ also confirmed that the spirit, being active and prayerful, can support the frail body, which tends to laziness and relaxation. Put differently, Christ gently encouraged His disciples to ensure having an active spirit in order to support their weakened bodies through sorrow and fatigue.

+ *Regardless of your degree of exhaustion at night, complete your prayers and readings; your love pleases God, despite your lack of concentration.*

#### **Vs. 42 - 44:**

Christ returned to pray - alone - repeating the same words. Once more, He found the disciples asleep when He returned. This confirmed their inability to stand by His side during that difficult time - thus increasing His sorrow. However, He was not dissuaded and He returned to pray, using the same words, for the third time.

+ *Persevere in your prayers and relationship with God. Adhere to your principles, regardless of the resistance or prevailing thinking around you. Christ teaches you the significance of perseverance in prayer, especially during hardships.*

#### **Vs. 45 & 46:**

When Christ returned, He rebuked His disciples for the third time - that was not merely the three who were with Him, rather, all of them; He said, "*Are you still sleeping and resting?*" As they started to be alert, He told them that the time for His arrest and Passion had come, and that they should wake up quickly, since Judas, accompanied by the chief priests' people had arrived. It should be noted that in St. John's gospel we read, "*Then Judas, having received a detachment of troops, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees....*" (John 18:3)

Note: The "*detachment of troops and officers*" consisted of Jews not Romans. They were guards appointed by the priests to maintain order in the temple, since the law prohibited temple defilement by the presence of Roman troops.

#### **(IX) Christ's arrest (vs. 47 - 56)**

*"And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him.' Immediately he went up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed Him. But*

*Jesus said to him, "Friend, why have you come?" Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took Him. And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" In that hour Jesus said to the multitudes, "Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me? I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and you did not seize Me. But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled." (Matthew 26:47 - 56)*

**Vs. 47 - 49:**

*"One of the twelve"* - This accentuates Judas' betrayal: being among the closest, how could he betray his Master??

*"A great multitude"* - This included the temple guards, the chief priest's guards and the Roman troops guarding the temple's exterior, plus some of the priests' followers who resisted Christ. The large number - hence, *"great"* - was to guard against any potential resistance, to Christ's arrest, on the part of His followers.

*"Elders of the people"* - Those were members of the Sanhedrin.

*"...and kissed Him"* - Judas used the kiss as an expression of love - in this case, hypocritically. His betrayal was thus completed by Christ's arrest. As Christ was awakening His disciples, His disciple, Judas Iscariot, came accompanied by a large number of troops armed with *"swords and clubs."* He gave Christ a kiss, which was the agreed-upon sign, hence, they would arrest the Person Whom Judas kisses. That was to ensure that they did not make the mistake of arresting someone who looked like Christ.

**V. 50:**

Christ rebuked Judas and warned him, giving him a chance to recant - He asked him, *"Friend, why have you come?"* Although he should have been ashamed of what he was doing (betraying Christ), regrettably, he persevered down the path of wickedness. Then the troops laid their hands on Jesus and arrested Him.

+ *Do not ignore the multiple chances of repentance that God grants you - lest your fate, in the end, should be like Judas'.*

**Vs. 51 & 52:**

*"One of those who were with Jesus"* - In his gospel, St. John tells us that that person was Peter (John 18:10 & 11). Likely, Matthew omitted his name fearing Jewish persecution - which was not a consideration in John's case, since he wrote his gospel after Jerusalem's destruction.

Peter was quite disturbed upon seeing His Teacher and dearly Beloved being arrested. Since the disciples had two swords (see Luke 22:38), Peter impulsively grabbed one of them - attempting to defend Christ - and cut off the right ear of the high priest's servant Malchus (see John 18:10). Christ, though, told him to return the sword to its place, since, *"all who take the sword will perish by the sword."*

Christ desired to purge Peter's heart, as well as all the other disciples' hearts, from evil towards their enemies, in order to plant love firmly in His children's hearts - even towards their enemies - and in order to emphasize that love was more powerful than violence.

Christ was resolved to accept His impending death, through which He would crush death, save His children from their sins, bind Satan, then rise triumphantly, proclaiming love's power and victory.

**Vs. 53 & 54:**

*"Do you think"* - This means, *"Are you continuing to doubt My powers having seen all the miracles I have performed?"*

Christ alerted Peter and the other disciples to His boundless powers - all the heavenly hosts are under His command, hence, all the angels, each of whom is more powerful than all mankind. Christ pointed out that He could ask the Father to provide Him *"with more than twelve legions* (a very large number) *of angels."*

However, He gave Himself up, of His own free will, for the salvation of His children, according to the prophecy: *"He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth."* (Isaiah 53:7)

**V. 55:**

Christ also rebuked the crowd coming out at night to arrest Him, armed with *"swords and clubs,"* as though they were arresting an escaped convict - despite the fact that He had preached among them daily in the temple. Thus, He revealed their trickery and weakness, since they had come to arrest Him away from the multitudes who would have resisted them. That could have also been intended to give them a chance to repent.

*"Daily"* - Metaphorically, this meant *"many days."* Christ taught frequently

and openly in the temple.

**"Teaching in the temple"** - This meant that Christ taught openly before the multitudes, and thus there was no need to come after Him at night, as though He were fleeing justice.

**"You did not seize Me"** - That was because they could not accuse Him of any crime, and because they feared the people's reaction, since He was considered to be a great Teacher.

#### **V. 56:**

Christ confirmed that what they were doing constituted fulfillment of the prophecies. When He was arrested, **"all the disciples forsook Him and fled."** They feared arrest, since they felt that their refuge and power had been lost, having believed that He would protect them against Roman and Jewish oppression (see Isaiah 63:3 & 5). Naturally, their abandonment hurt Christ psychologically, given that they had just promised never to forsake Him, even unto death. However, through His love, He excused them and forgave their weakness following His resurrection.

+ *Do not be perturbed if your loved ones forsook you during hardships. Let not your wrath be kindled against them. Rather, accept their excuse being human weakness.*

#### **(X) The religious trial (vs. 57 - 68)**

**"And those who had laid hold of Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. But Peter followed Him at a distance to the high priest's courtyard. And he went in and sat with the servants to see the end. Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.' " And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death." Then they spat in His face and**

*beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, "Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?"* (Matthew 57 - 68)

**V. 57:**

Christ was led *"away to Caiaphas the high priest."* There, *"the scribes and the elders were assembled"* preparing for Christ's trial (see V. 66 below.)

**V. 58:**

Although the disciples had forsaken Christ due to their weakness, Peter's love drove him to follow the crowd, that had arrested Christ, into the courtyard of the high priest's residence, to find out the fate of his Teacher. We also learn from John 18:5 that, due to his relationship with the high priest, John managed to enter the residence. However, despite the disciples' love, their human weakness prevented them from defending Christ.

**Vs. 59 - 61:**

Throughout Christ's life on earth, the Jews were incapable of attributing a single fault to Him - despite their numerous attempts at ensnaring Him through debates. During this trial, though, they persisted in finding fault with Him - even resorting to false witnesses. Nevertheless, the false witnesses they managed to muster failed to agree, thus revealing their obvious lies. Therefore, the use of false witnesses was unsuccessful.

Finally, two men testified falsely against Him, saying that Christ had said He could destroy Solomon's temple and rebuild it in three days. In fact, what He had really said was, *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."* (John 2:19) Christ was referring to the temple of His body, meaning that they would crucify Him and He would rise on the third day. Thus, they were incapable of proving their testimony, and the entire assembly was perplexed, failing to accuse Christ.

The priests had understood perfectly that Christ was referring to His body - not the temple. This is evinced by the fact that, following Christ's death, they had told Pilate, *"Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.'"* (Matthew 27:63)

*"Two false witnesses"* - According to Jewish law, *"two"* is the minimum number of witnesses from whom testimony would be acceptable.

**V. 62:**

The high priest's perplexity and failure to pin any accusation on Christ, led him to ask Christ why He had not responded to the testimony presented by

the two false witnesses - likely, in order to find fault with Christ's response for which He could be condemned.

**V. 63:**

**"I put You under oath by the living God"** - This is the oath stipulated by Jewish law to confirm what was (or would be) said.

Christ was silent. He did not respond to any of their false accusations, since He knew the extent of their hatred and resistance to Him, and that they had no desire to know the truth.

Again, driven by his perplexity, the high priest asked Christ, **"Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God."** Put differently, he asked Christ whether He was indeed the awaited Messiah. Unfortunately, he had no intention of understanding - since the prophecies, which he well knew were in the holy scriptures, confirmed that Christ was the awaited Messiah. Rather, once more, he attempted to trick Christ into saying something wrong, such as pretending that He was Christ when, in fact, He was just another person.

**V. 64:**

Christ responded saying, **"It is as you said."** In other words, Christ agreed. He said this to end their uncertainty, offering them the chance and evidence to crucify Him, and kill Him; since He was giving Himself up, of His own free will, for our salvation.

Christ went even further by proclaiming His Divinity, saying that He would sit **"at the right of the Power."** Put differently, He would remain in the perfect Divine power and glory until His Second Coming **"on the clouds of heaven"** to judge the world, as prophesied in Psalm 110:1, and according to His own proclamation about judgment - see Chapter 24:30.

**"Hereafter"** - This means that, a few hours hence, redemption on the Cross would be fulfilled, and He would rise to His glory in heaven.

**"The Son of Man"** - Christ meant that, *"The Person you see before you now as a weak human being, will be transformed, within hours, to His heavenly glory, and He will be the One to judge you. You are judging Me now, but I will judge you eternally on Judgment Day."*

**V. 65:**

Finally, the high priest found cause for sentencing Christ to death.

Expressing his disdain to such blasphemy, he **"tore his clothes."** This act signaled the end of Jewish priesthood, paving the way for Christian priesthood to start with Christ its High Priest, Who offered Himself a Sacrifice on the Cross to save all believers.

This reveals the extent of the high priest's wickedness: he failed to check

whether Christ was the Son of God or not - rather, he considered Christ's response "blasphemous," and seized that opportunity to sentence Him, and to incite the council to condemn Him, to death.

#### **V. 66:**

The high priest asked the council to sentence Christ - so they condemned Him to death on the pretext of blasphemy. The law stipulated stoning as the penalty for blasphemy. However, fearing the people, they did not stone Christ - alternatively, they sought the support of the civic authorities for executing the death penalty. They obtained this support from Pilate, who ordered Christ's crucifixion, which was the Romans' procedure for treating criminals. It should be noted that Christ was tried six times:

First: The first trial was in the residence of Annas, the former high priest and Caiaphas' father-in-law (John 18:19 - 24).

Second: The second trial (mentioned in verse 57) was in the residence of Caiaphas, the actual high priest. There, the priests, scribes and elders assembled, and attempted to find sufficient cause for sentencing Christ to death.

Third: The third trial was on Friday morning (see Chapter 27:1 & 2) before the Sanhedrin Council. That was because Jewish law prohibited evening trials. Therefore, according to John 18:28, Caiaphas' sentencing was approved Friday morning.

There were three subsequent trials: two before Pilate (Chapter 27:2 - 24 and Mark 15:1 - 15), and one before Herod (Luke 23:6 - 12).

#### **Vs. 67 & 68:**

This marks the beginning of the mockery and suffering that Christ endured. The high priest's troops "*spat in His face and beat Him.*" Then they covered His face and "*struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, 'Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?'*" That was to show that He was feigning prophecy when, in fact, He was a weak Man incapable of defending Himself.

+ *Because of His love for us, Christ endured, silently, all manner of physical and psychological abuse. Always remember that it was because of your sins, that your Redeemer endured such suffering. This should induce you to reject your transgressions in shame and humiliation, leading you to repentance, and to God's forgiveness.*

#### **(XI) Peter's denial (vs. 69 - 75)**

*"Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee.' But he denied it before*

*them all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying." And when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth." But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!" And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you." Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly." (Matthew 26:69 - 75)*

**Vs. 69 & 70:**

While Peter was sitting in the high priest's courtyard, a maid saw him, and told others that he was among Christ's disciples. She had seen him amidst the multitudes when Christ was teaching and performing miracles. Peter, though, denied that "accusation" saying that he knew nothing about Christ, hence, *"I do not know what you are saying."* He said that to protect himself against the possibility of arrest and prosecution. According to Mark 14:68, the cock, at this point, crowed for the first time. That was around midnight, at the beginning of Christ's trial in Caiaphas' palace, and which lasted for about three hours. That was Peter's first denial.

**Vs. 71 & 72:**

Fear led Peter to leave his place and go to an adjoining aisle. Another maid spotted him and, likely having overheard the first maid, told bystanders that Peter was among Christ's followers. Peter, though, denied vehemently, swearing that he did not know Christ. That was his second denial. Bitterness had started building up in his heart, having heard the cock's first crowing. He was torn between fear of the Jews, and guilt for having denied Christ.

**V. 73:**

A group of men, who had been standing in the aisle, subsequently came along, and heard Peter talking to the maid. They declared that he was one of Christ's followers, stating that his Galilean dialect betrayed him. It could also be inferred from the other gospels that several people had identified Peter as one of Christ's disciples. He was cornered, but he persisted in his denial.

**V. 74:**

Peter persisted in his denials, swearing that he did not know Christ, and even cursing Him, to confirm his denial.

Thus, he denied Christ for the third time. At that point, the cock crowed for the second time. That was during the second watch, which is around three o'clock in the morning.

+ *Fear causes loss of composure - this leads easily to falling into several sins. Cling to God and seek His help; this will deliver you from fear and all consequential sins.*

**V. 75:**

When the cock crowed, Peter remembered Christ's warning, that he would deny Him - this alerted him, and he walked out of the Caiaphas' residence, feeling that he had betrayed his beloved Teacher. He offered sincere repentance through abundant tears.

Although Christ had not yet risen from the dead and shown His power, Peter was moved by love, and he repented for having disowned his Master.

+ *When you err, remember that love is the primary motivation for a life of repentance. Remember God's love and care for you. Remember His death on the Cross for you, and His fractured body and shed blood offered on the altar for your communion. All of that should motivate you to return to God, to repent, and not persevere in sinfulness, regardless of your surrounding circumstances and factors luring you. Love is the most precious thing in the whole world.*

## Chapter 27

### Christ's crucifixion and burial

#### **(I) Christ's trial before the Sanhedrin (vs. 1 & 2)**

*"When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor."* (Matthew 27:1 & 2)

#### **V. 1:**

Following Christ's trial in the high priest's - Caiaphas' - residence, He was taken to the Sanhedrin's Council (see Chapter 5:20 & 21), located in one of the temple's porches - that was at dawn. There, He was sentenced to death. It should be noted that, in Jewish law, the death sentence could only be passed after two sessions, and only during the day.

That was Christ's third, and final, religious trial, where it was decided to kill Him; the petition, to be presented to Pilate to have Christ killed, was also formulated. The assembly agreed to:

1. Seek Pilate's agreement to have Christ killed.
2. Accuse Christ of claiming to be King of the Jews, in the event of Pilate's rejection of the petition mentioned above. In this case, Christ would be a rebel against Caesar, inciting the people to resist Roman authority. They would also claim that Christ prohibited tax payment - thus provoked, the civic authority would be stirred against Him.
3. Accuse Christ of blasphemy, having claimed to be the Son of God.

Pilate responded as follows:

1. He rejected their decision to have Christ killed.
2. He examined their second accusation and, finding Christ innocent, again he rejected their request to have Him killed.
3. He ignored the accusation of blasphemy - since it pertained to Jewish law and, hence, was not punishable under Roman law.

Their only recourse was to emphasize the second accusation, namely, that Christ was King of the Jews. Thus, they maneuvered Pilate into an awkward position: fear of being perceived supportive of Christ against Caesar, he agreed with them and ordered His crucifixion.

#### **V. 2:**

The Roman authorities had appointed Pilate governor over Judea. He was ruthless, and many had shed their blood at his hands. During his ten-year tenure, the Jews had filed several complaints against him to Caesar;

nevertheless, truthfulness was not among his virtues and he did anything to cling to power.

+ *Do not use your mental prowess wickedly, seeking accusations against those who trouble you, in order to stir others against them. In this way, you would be incurring God's wrath against you. Furthermore, your heart will be perturbed, and you will lose the love of those around you, even if they agreed with you, because they would sense your aggressive notions.*

## **(II) Judas returns the silver (vs. 3 - 10)**

*"Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' And they said, 'What is that to us? You see to it!' Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood.' And they consulted together and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me.'"* (Matthew 27:3 - 10)

### **Vs. 3 & 4:**

*"He had been condemned"* - The Jews had sentenced Him to death.

*"What is that to us?"* - This means, *"What you are saying is immaterial to us - we have achieved our goal, namely, Christ's arrest."*

*"You see to it"* - This means, *"This is your responsibility - do whatever you wish away from us - we will not help you."*

Having learnt that the Jews had sentenced Christ to death, Judas' conscience prodded him, and he felt the atrociousness of his betrayal. The silver became a heavy load on his heart reminding him of his sin. In the morning he went to the temple, and found that Christ had been taken to Pilate - but a few priests were available. He therefore threw down the silver to them to rid himself of the source of his conscience's prodding. He confessed that Christ was innocent and that, delivering Christ to them, made him a traitor. Unfortunately, there was no hope for his remorse - since it did not constitute repentance. Repentance is not merely remorse; it is faith in God coupled with a desire to live with Him.

On the other hand, the priests and elders tried to distance themselves from

their transgression by refusing to take back the silver. They told Judas that they were not responsible and that he should bear responsibility for his sin. This is truly amazing, given that they would kill Him shortly thereafter?! That is precisely the kind of deception through which a person tricks himself into non-repentance.

#### **V. 5:**

Upon the priests' refusal to take back the silver from him, Judas threw it before them, believing that such action would absolve him of his sin, and left the temple - he even left town. His constant feeling of guilt led him to hang himself. According to Acts 1:18, Judas "*...purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.*"

#### **V. 6:**

Since the silver constituted "*the price of blood*" of a Person, the chief priests could not return it to the temple's treasury. Donations to the treasury were considered holy. Nevertheless, they failed to repent, and they persisted down their evil path of crucifying Christ.

#### **Vs. 7 & 8:**

*"They consulted together"* - Those were the Sanhedrin members, following their delivering Christ for crucifixion.

*"The potter's field"* - This name could have been derived from the custom of using that field's earth to make pottery. Being unsuitable for agriculture, it must have been cheap.

*"To bury strangers"* - This refers to Jews from out of town, who died in Jerusalem, and were too poor to have a place for their burial.

*"The field of blood"* - That was because they bought it for the price of a Person's blood, namely, Christ.

*"This day"* - That was the time of writing of Matthew's gospel.

The priests found a solution: they would use that silver to buy something that would be considered a good deed. Thus, they bought "*the potter's field*" and dedicated it "*to bury strangers*" who had no other place for burial.

*"Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood,"* emphasizing the enormity of their sin. Their concealment behind an apparent good deed failed to wipe out their sin.

#### **Vs. 9 & 10:**

Their wickedness fulfilled Jeremiah's and Zechariah's prophecies concerning

the potter's field and the thirty pieces of silver: *"And the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"--that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord for the potter."* (Zechariah 11:13)

Thus it can be seen that all the details concerning Christ's suffering for mankind's sake were foretold in the Old Testament, so that the Jews may believe. Unfortunately, they hardened their hearts and crucified Him.

+ *Be vigilant, do not harden your heart, and do not reject rebuke either by others, or through the holy Bible and spiritual sermons. Rather, consider those as Divine messages, alerting and restoring you to His love - so that you may repent.*

### **(III) The trial before Pilate (vs. 11 - 14)**

*"Now Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" So Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly."* (Matthew 27:11 - 14)

#### **V. 11:**

Christ's trial started before the Roman authorities, represented by the governor, Pilate. That was Christ's fourth trial. Pilate asked Him whether He was the King of the Jews - and Christ responded in the affirmative. Christ's intent was to give Pilate the opportunity of not committing the sin of delivering Him to the Jews; that did not mean, at all, that Christ had second thoughts about fulfillment of redemption - rather, to emphasize that Pilate had no excuse, and to alert him that he was in the presence of a King which, in turn should mitigate evil sentencing.

As seen in John 18:36 & 37, Christ clarified to Pilate that His kingdom was spiritual - not terrestrial. Thus, the Jews' allegation against Christ failed - namely, they failed in provoking Pilate to rule against Christ. Having learnt that Christ's kingdom was spiritual, Pilate proclaimed Him innocent by saying, *"I find no fault in Him at all."* (John 18:38) Also, *"I find no fault in this man...."* and *"I have found no fault in this Man...."* (Luke 23:4 & 14)

#### **Vs. 12 - 14:**

The Jews' chief priests and elders tried to prove to Pilate that Christ was inciting the people - as mentioned in Luke 23:5. Christ, though, never attempted to defend Himself, since He knew the Jews' resolve to attribute false allegations to Him. Christ also knew of Pilate's weakness, namely,

despite his knowledge of Christ's innocence, he would try, out of fear, to please the Jews, and he would try to ensnare Christ into saying something that would merit His conviction.

The governor was amazed at Christ's silence; Christ even ignored Pilate's question as to why He never attempted to refute their accusations - thus amazing Pilate even more. Under such circumstances, the accused would normally defend themselves in order to escape the death penalty. Christ, though, did not need to defend Himself; He desired to fulfill our salvation through His death on the Cross.

Thus, Christ's innocence was once more evident to Pilate. Having learnt that Christ hailed from Galilee, he sent Him to Herod; at that time, Herod (the Galilean ruler) was visiting Jerusalem. Having tried Christ and found Him innocent - this is Christ's fifth trial - (Luke 23:15), Herod sent Him back to Pilate for His sixth and final trial.

Therefore, Christ's innocence was evident three times: twice before Pilate and once before Herod.

However, Pilate's weakness prevented him from releasing Christ (see the number of religious and civic trials which Christ endured - Chapter 26:66) + *Even if others were silent before your faults, do not persist in that path - rather, recant and repent.*

#### **(IV) Barabbas' release (vs. 15 - 26)**

*"Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him." But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They said, "Barabbas!" Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!" Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!" When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on*

*us and on our children." Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified." (Matthew 27:15 - 26)*

**Vs. 15 - 18:**

Pilate found himself confronting an innocent, peace-loving Person, with Whom he could find no fault deserving death. However, Pilate's weak personality prohibited his proclaiming Christ's innocence. Attempting to please the people, while maintaining his position, he thought of a means to save Christ from death while, at the same time, not antagonizing the Jews. He was accustomed to release one of the prisoners on each Passover Feast, to indicate his good will towards the Jews. He therefore asked them whether they preferred the release of Christ or the release of a well-known criminal called Barabbas. He knew that Christ was innocent and that the chief priests envied Him for having attracted the multitudes through His teachings and miracles.

*"Gathered together"* - This refers to the multitude - not the chief priests; Pilate thought that since Christ had done good deeds for them, they would ask for His release.

**V. 19:**

God alerted Pilate for the second time, so that he may not err against Christ and sentence Him to death: his wife sent him a warning not to do anything against Christ, since she had seen, in a dream, confirmation of Christ's innocence, and His having to endure suffering for no crime committed. The holy Bible does not mention details of that dream. However, it constitutes a testimony from a pagan woman confirming Christ's righteousness; at the same time the Jews had condemned Him to death, while all His disciples and loved ones had forsaken Him.

*"Today"* - That refers to the eve of that day, which is counted as part of that day. This means that the dream was a Divine proclamation, since the Jews had not yet delivered Christ to Pilate when his wife had her dream that night.

**V. 20:**

Envy and bitterness led the Jews' priests and elders to provoke an uproar among the assembled multitude before Pilate, inciting them to demand the release of the convicted criminal Barabbas, and to kill Christ. The multitude was thus persuaded to favor Barabbas, whose crimes were certain, over Christ, Whose righteousness and sinlessness were certain.

**Vs. 21 & 22:**

Pilate gave the multitude a chance to contemplate their decision - then he asked whether he should release Barabbas or Christ. They clamored for the release of Barabbas, and demanded that Christ be crucified - likely due to instigation by the priests and elders.

Romans executed criminals by crucifixion; that would have been Barabbas's fate - but the Jews demanded that Christ take his place.

**V. 23:**

Pilate reiterated the question - weakly; he asked the multitude what crime(s) Christ had committed, expecting that they change their mind. That was a ridiculous question - as though it were the people's decision rather than his!! The multitude called once more for Christ's crucifixion.

Thus, God gave them several opportunities to repent - yet, they insisted on maintaining their wicked path, calling for the execution of the Righteous Christ.

It should be noted that the multitude was given three warnings:

The first (John 5:22 and Matthew 26:24) was a warning from Christ Himself, when He proclaimed He would return to judge the whole world, and to condemn them for their evil decision to kill Him.

The second (verse 4 above) was when Judas Iscariot proclaimed Christ's innocence. The third (see verse 24 below) was when Pilate washed his hands before the multitude, proclaiming Christ's innocence.

+ *God will alert you many times to renounce your path of sinfulness. Do not turn a deaf ear to His warnings, persisting in wrong-doing.*

**V. 24:**

**"A tumult was rising"** - This refers to an uproar in Jerusalem, for which Pilate would be blamed by Caesar, and for which he could be dismissed from his post for failing to maintain order in the city.

**"Washed his hands"** - That was an old custom (see Deuteronomy 21:6) signaling a person's absolution from responsibility for what was occurring.

**"You see to it"** - This means *"You are responsible for His death sentence."*

Pilate declared that Christ was righteous and innocent. He washed his hands before the multitude to declare his absolution from the crime of executing Christ. Nevertheless, washing his hands would never relieve him from the responsibility of killing Christ - because he was capable of protecting Him, and not delivering Him to the Jews. However, his weakness motivated him to fear their cries, and to care more for his position as governor, than for the truth.

### **Vs. 25 & 26:**

The Jews, assembled there, declared their assumption of responsibility for Christ's execution. They urged Pilate to crucify Him, crying, "***His blood be on us and on our children!***" That was because whoever (the plaintiff) accuses a person of a crime, and the accused turns out to be innocent, then the punishment falls onto the plaintiff. That was the case with Daniel's accusers (Daniel 6:24). The crime of crucifying Christ continues to be attributed to each Jew who had/has not believed on Him.

Pilate weakly submitted to the Jews' demands and ordered that Christ be scourged then delivered to the Jews for crucifixion.

**"Scourged"** - Criminals sentenced by the Romans were scourged before their crucifixion. Roman scourging was merciless - the strands of the leather whips they used had sharp metal pieces at their tips, in order to inflict cruel wounds on the culprit.

+ *Cling to the truth regardless of consequences - because the truth is God. Being languid in proclaiming the truth is tantamount to rejecting God. Do not ignore an innocent person's oppression, if it were within your power to defend him. Do not seek your own interests at the expense of an oppressed person.*

### **(V) Christ's mockery and Passion (vs. 27 - 31)**

***"Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole garrison around Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified."*** (Matthew 27:27 - 31)

### **V. 27:**

Having scourged Christ and put back His clothes on, they took Him into the "***Praetorium***" (the Roman governor's official residence.) There, "***the whole garrison***" gathered around Him. A garrison was normally about 600 strong. It would seem that the Jews had alerted Pilate to the possibility of Christ's followers attempting to rescue Christ - thus, as a precautionary measure, he amassed that large number of troops.

**V. 28:**

Christ was "*stripped*" once more (the first time was to have Him scourged.) Then they put on Him a scarlet robe - mercilessly ignoring His torn and bleeding body. Likely, that was an old robe stored in the governor's house. The scarlet color mirrors the color of blood that He would shed for the redemption and salvation of mankind.

**V. 29:**

The Jews went to further extremes in their mockery and torture of Christ by placing a crown of thorns on His head - instead of a crown of gold and gems - plus a reed in His right hand instead of the King's gold/ivory scepter. Mockingly, they bowed down before Him saying, "**Hail, King of the Jews!**" + *Behold, the all-Righteous has borne our sins. He endured all that we should have endured. A sinner flogs himself with the whips of lust tearing into his flesh, thus believing that he is king; he wears regal attire proudly, while the crowns of which he boasts are mere material perishables plus the cursed earth which yields thorns and thistles. The sole covering over his head is pain and anxiety. Having lost control over himself, he becomes like a reed shaken by the wind - put differently, he drifts with the evil worldly current. He tricks himself even further by enjoying the words of fake praise and respect, uttered by those exploiting him.*

**V. 30:**

They continued to mock and despise Him. "**Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head.**" That was the third phase of Christ's mockery. The first was from the temple's attendants in Caiaphas' residence (see Chapter 26:67 & 68), and the second was by Herod and his troops, mentioned in Luke 23:11.

**V. 31:**

Having mocked Him by various means, they returned His own clothes and led Him to be crucified - that was about the third hour. The trial before the Jewish council took place at dawn on Friday. The three civic trials started at dawn, and extended till the third hour, when Pilate delivered Him to the troops for crucifixion.

+ *Do not be perturbed, if exposed to mockery or disdain - because your all-Holy, all-Righteous, God endured all humiliation for your sake. Therefore, endure for His sake and be confident of His support. He will reveal your righteousness and reward you in heaven. He will grant you inner peace on earth throughout all hardships.*

**(VI) Christ's crucifixion (vs. 32 - 38)**

*"Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross. And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, Place of a Skull, they gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted it, He would not drink. Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet: "They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots." Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left." (Matthew 27:32 - 38)*

**V. 32:**

Christ carried the Cross from the governor's house to Jerusalem's outskirts. His exhausted body, covered with wounds and contusions, was unable to complete the trip under the heavy weight of the Cross. This confirms Christ's humanity: He assumed a true body, exhausted by scourging.

In order to avoid any delays, the troops leading Him found a man, a Cyrenean, named Simon, whom they compelled to carry the Cross; it is believed that he was a Jewish olive farmer, hailing from North Africa - from what is now Libya. He may have shown compassion for Christ. The procession then continued marching towards the site of crucifixion. Since the cross was a sign of shame, the troops did not carry it.

We can speculate symbolism between Simon and the Church of the New Testament: hence, believers carry the cross behind Christ, as a sign of their love for Him, by renouncing all sins and enduring suffering for His sake.

**V. 33:**

They arrived at a spot outside Jerusalem called "*Golgotha*" - a Hebrew word meaning "*Place of a Skull*." An old Jewish tradition says that Adam was buried there - hence the name "skull" or "Adam's skull." Behold, the second Adam, Christ, was crucified there to save the first Adam and all his seed. Christ was crucified outside Jerusalem - as they used to slaughter some of the sacrifices outside the city; thus, Christ was rejected by all, enduring all the shame and humiliation.

Christ's exit from the city and arrival at Golgotha occurred during the third hour - hence, between the third and sixth hours (see Chapter 20:2 - 7).

*+ When people reject you, remember what they did with your Master Jesus Christ, and endure for His sake, as He endured for yours.*

#### V. 34:

It was a Roman custom to give whoever is about to be crucified *"sour wine mingled with gall."* This was done to sedate the recipient partially, so that he may endure the pain. Some Jews used to offer this drink to someone being executed as an act of mercy - likely, that was the case with Christ. On the other hand Christ, Who endured the bitterness of our sins, *"would not drink"* any sedative, in order to bear the full brunt of our sins, hence, *"....He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed."* (Isaiah 53:5)

St. Mark gives a slightly different account: *"....they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink...."* (Mark 15:23) There is not much difference between *"sour wine"* and *"wine,"* or between *"gall"* and *"myrrh."* The net effect of the drink was the same, whether *"sour wine mingled with gall"* or *"wine mingled with myrrh."*

It should be noted that offering wine mingled with myrrh to Christ prior to His crucifixion was a different incident from the second time, when He was offered vinegar on the Cross (see verse 48 below) when He said *"I thirst."* (John 19:28)

#### V. 35:

The New Testament Church is as close to Christ as the garments clinging to His body. In John 19:23, we read, *"Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part...."* The four parts could be symbolic of the "four corners of the earth," and the Gentile soldiers could symbolize salvation having been offered to Jews and Gentiles alike, and to all who believe on Christ.

Furthermore, John 19:23 - 25, tells us, *".....and also the tunic.....without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it....." that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: "They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.""* (Psalm 22:18)

Analogously, Christ desires that His Church remain as one entity without schisms.

Thus, we see that David prophesied the partitioning of, and casting lots on, Christ's garments. The cross constituted extreme torture; whoever was being executed thus, was stripped bare, nailed to the cross by his hands and feet, and left hanging unto death - from bleeding and excruciating pain.

For the Romans, who ruled the world at that time, the cross also reflected humiliation and shame.

Human savagery is accentuated in partitioning the garments. They were preoccupied by material acquisition, at the expense of torturing others. Similarly, Christ dies for our salvation, while we partition His garments. They used to position the convict horizontally on the cross, on the ground, as he was being nailed to it. Then they would lift the cross and place it in a hole, dug for that purpose, making sure that the crucified's feet were about 30 - 40 centimeters above the ground.

Christ was nailed to the Cross at the end of the third hour. For this reason we read in Mark 15:25 "***Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him.***" However, in John 19:14 & 15, we read, "***...it was.....about the sixth hour....***" and that Christ's trial before Pilate was around the sixth hour - hence slightly before the end of the third hour. That was the period spanning the exit from Jerusalem, proceeding to Golgotha, and nailing Christ to the Cross. Hence, the sixth hour saw His hanging on the Cross, and securing the Cross to the ground, followed by darkness over the whole earth (see verse 45 below.)

#### **V. 36:**

The Roman troops sat down to guard Christ. Paradoxically, He is the guardian over the whole world, but He humbled Himself in submission - in order to redeem and save us. The Roman troops were thus witnesses to Christ's crucifixion and death - further evidence for the power of His resurrection; furthermore, no human, resembling Christ, was crucified. He was unequivocally the Christ Whom Judas delivered, Who was tried by the Jews, Who was crucified, and Who died for the salvation of believers on Him.

#### **V. 37:**

The inscription placed by the Romans at the top of the Cross, said that He was "***The King of the Jews***" - which was not in accordance with what the people's priests and elders wanted. However, this was Divinely permitted, since He was the King of kings, redeeming His people.

Customarily, a cross would bear an inscription stating the crime attributed to the crucified. In Christ's case, the intent was to state that He had claimed to be the King of the Jews - implying rebellion against Caesar.

It should be noted that all four evangelists unanimously stated that Christ was crucified for claiming to be "***The King of the Jews.***" The following are the statements given in the four gospels:

Matthew 27:37: "***THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.***"

Mark 15:26: "***THE KING OF THE JEWS.***"

Luke 23:38: "***THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.***"

John 19:19: "***JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.***"

It should also be noted that both Sts. Luke (23:38) and John (19:20) mentioned that the inscription on the Cross was in three languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

**V. 38:**

Christ condescended to live among sinners; *"...two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left"* - He sought their salvation. One of them, the penitent thief, believed on Him, and Christ accepted him in His paradise (see Luke 23:40 - 43).

+ *Be humble among the weak and despised - thus, you may encourage them and draw them to Christ. There they will find peace - as Christ humbled Himself and was crucified among the evil-doers.*

**(VII) The attempt to hinder redemption (vs. 39 - 44)**

*"And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.'" Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.' " Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing."* (Matthew 27:39 - 44)

**Vs. 39 & 40:**

Satan was in constant doubt and disbelief concerning the Person of Jesus Christ. When he feared that Christ could indeed be the awaited Messiah, hanging on the Cross, he tried to halt the process of redemption and, consequently, halt the process of being bound by Christ. Therefore, Satan incited passers-by to mock Christ, and to challenge Him to come down from the Cross, reminding Him that He said He could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Put differently, if He were really capable of doing that, and if He were really the Son of God as He had claimed, then He should have been capable of coming down from the Cross. However, Christ was not referring to Solomon's temple, rather, to the temple of His body, hence, He would raise Himself from the dead on the third day, after having been crucified. That was the false testimony against Him, namely, that He said He would destroy the temple of the Jews - this did not happen.

Jews, in the vicinity, as well as the chief priests (see verse 41 below) and the Roman soldiers (Luke 23:36) participated in mocking Christ. Thus, Christ

was significantly challenged to come down from the Cross and discontinue the redemption process.

**Vs. 41 & 42:**

The chief priests joined the scribes and elders in mocking Christ, saying that since He had wrought miracles and raised the dead, He could very well save Himself. Put differently, they were attempting to prove His impotence, provoking Him to respond to their outrageous challenges, claiming that His inability to save Himself was sufficient proof that all His earlier miracles were due to sorcery, and to His association with the chief of demons. Mocking Him further, they said that He claimed to be the King of the Jews, since their mindset was fixated on an earthly reign, linked to power and material splendor, rather than a heavenly kingdom.

**V. 43:**

They persisted in their mockery of Christ. They told Him, "If You were really the Son of God, and You submitted to Him as You claimed, then why does God not save You from suffering and death? Your crucifixion shows that You are not the awaited Messiah." David prophesied this mockery in detail in Psalm 22:7 & 8.

**V. 44:**

One of the thieves crucified with Christ formulated his blasphemy differently, saying, "*If You are the Christ, save Yourself and save us.*" (Luke 23:39)

The gospel says that both thieves mocked Christ - since one of them implicated the other. However, in Luke 23:40 & 41, we read that the other thief did not join in the mockery and believed on Christ.

The latter was the "penitent thief" - the Coptic Orthodox Church chose to label that thief as the "thief on the right," since the right side is considered to represent blessing and power, while the left stands for being distant from God.

*+ If ever provoked by evil-doers, do not respond; this will save you from erring like them. Rather, flee with your life from anger; this will render you truly Christ-like in strength, and will facilitate realization of your goals.*

**(VIII) Christ's death (vs. 45 - 50)**

*"Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' Some of those who stood there, when they*

*heard that, said, "This Man is calling for Elijah!" Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink. The rest said, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him." And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit."* (Matthew 27:45 - 50)

**V. 45:**

Nature proclaimed its grief and disdain for what humans were doing to their crucified God. Thus, "*there was darkness over all the land*" in the middle of the day, when the sun is at its brightest: from midday until three o'clock in the afternoon (from the sixth to the ninth hour according to Jewish time.) This darkness represents sin's darkness in which the world was immersed. Christ was crucified to lift this darkness from us. This darkness was also an expression of nature's sorrow over the crucifixion and death of its Creator, while alerting evil-doers to repent, following the penitent thief's example of belief and repentance.

**V. 46:**

*"And about the ninth hour"* - This means "towards the end of the sixth hour."

*"Eli"* - This is a Hebrew word meaning "My God." In Mark 15:34, the evangelist mentions the Aramaic word "*Eloi.*"

*"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* - This is a well-known Jewish quote, since it is the first verse in Psalm 22. This psalm refers to clear prophecies concerning Christ's suffering and crucifixion. In that psalm, David foretells:

1. The people's scorn and disdain (Vs. 6 - 8).
2. Christ's thirst prior to His death (V. 15).
3. Piercing Christ's hands and feet (V. 16).
4. Partitioning His garments and casting lots on them (V. 18).

For this reason, Christ quoted this psalm: it was as though He were telling the Jews to refer to David's prophecies about Him, to realize what they were in the process of doing to Him.

Of course, it should never be inferred that God had abandoned Him - He was the incarnate God: the Son and Father are of one essence.

Christ's cry is indicative of the excruciating pain He was enduring - both physical and psychological. That was because He was bearing the sins of the entire world, and He was the all-holy God Who is fully incompatible with sin - thus accentuating the heinous situation.

### **Vs. 47 - 49:**

The Jews standing by who heard Him, thought He was "*calling for Elijah!*" That was because "Eli" and "Elijah" sound very similar - the Jews also had believed that Elijah would come a second time. Thus, they mocked Christ saying, "*Let us see if Elijah will come to save Him.*" This statement implied that Elijah would not save Him.

Confirming His humanity, Christ said that He was thirsty (John 19:28) - a crucified person would normally feel extremely thirsty. St. John tells us, "*Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth.*" (John 19:29) A "*hyssop*" is a plant whose leaves the Jews used to sprinkle holy water, in one of their rites.

### **V. 50:**

Thus, having "*cried out with a loud voice,*" expressing extreme pain, Christ had completed His sufferings, and died on the Cross. His spirit left His body, and redemption was fulfilled. However, His Divinity remained united with His body and His Spirit.

On the Cross, Christ said the following:

1. "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*" (Luke 23:34) - a prayer for those who had crucified Him.

2. "*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.*" (Luke 23:43) - a promise to the penitent thief to be with Him in Paradise.

3. "*Woman, behold your son!*" And "*Behold your mother!*" (John 19:26 & 27) - as He handed over His mother to His disciple John.

4. "*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*" Matthew 27:46) - a cry of extreme pain to God.

5. "*I thirst.*" (John 19:28) - when He was thirsty.

6. "*It is finished!*" (John 19:30) - this meant that humanity's sin debt was paid in full, thus fulfilling redemption and salvation for all mankind.

7. "*Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.*" (Luke 23:46) - when He cried with a loud voice committing His spirit to His Father.

+ *By contemplating Christ's suffering on the Cross, you will feel the extent of His love for you. You will then love Him always.*

### **(IX) Concurrent events with Christ's death (vs. 51 - 56)**

*"Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went*

*into the holy city and appeared to many. So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!" And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons."* (Matthew 27:51 - 56)

#### **V. 51:**

At Christ's death, at the ninth hour, *"the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."* That veil was a huge curtain, seven meters wide and fourteen metres high. The veil separated the holy place from the holy of holies (\*), which was accessible only to the high priest once per year. Since only priests were allowed entry into the holy place, they were the only ones who could have seen the veil tearing; some did see it, believed, and proclaimed what had happened.

The torn veil is the second indication of the demise of Jewish priesthood, and the advent of Christian priesthood (the first indication was when Caiaphas tore his clothes - see Chapter 26:56). Christ fulfilled redemption on the Cross as High Priest, offering Himself a Sacrifice on our behalf. His death opened for us the path to the holy of holies, hence, Paradise and the kingdom of heaven. In the Old Testament, the high priest was permitted to enter the holy of holies, bearing blood which he sprinkled over the Ark of the Covenant. Now Christ, the High Priest, opened the way to the holy of holies through His death and the breaking of His body on the Cross,. Thus, we may not only see the sanctuary and the altar in church, but we can also partake of His holy body and blood.

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(\*) To facilitate the reader's understanding, the Jewish temple consisted of three main sections: the external porch (analogous to the church's nave) where the congregation was allowed, the holy place, and the holy of holies - those two latter sections were accessible only to priests (they could be analogous to a church's sanctuary and altar).

*"The earth quaked, and the rocks were split"* - This refers to nature's violent reaction before the Divine salvation being fulfilled on the Cross. This could also have a symbolic spiritual connotation, namely, shaking of the terrestrial lusts which Christ lifted from us, and splitting of the hardened hearts so that Christ may enter and indwell them.

### **Vs. 52 & 53:**

In addition to nature and the temple, death also reacted - no longer did it have authority over God's children; thus, ***"the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints (believers) who had fallen asleep were raised."*** Through His Cross, Christ transported them from Hades to Paradise. Their resurrection proclaimed their joy for having acquired salvation. ***"Coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city (Jerusalem - where God's temple was located) and appeared to many"*** - to proclaim Christ's resurrection and salvation to the Jews, so they may believe on Christ the Redeemer. The saints could have been either Old Testament prophets and men of God, or reposed believers on the awaited Messiah.

### **V. 54:**

Upon witnessing the earthquake, the splitting rocks and the darkness, the centurion and his accompanying troops guarding Christ realized that He was not an ordinary human being, and declared fearfully, ***"Truly this was the Son of God."*** Thus, they believed what He had said about Himself, namely, He was indeed the Son of God.

St. John tells us in John 19:31 that, at that point in time, the Jews sought Pilate's permission to break the legs of the crucified, so that they may die, and so that their bodies may not be left hanging during the eight days of the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread. Pilate agreed, and the soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves; however, they found that Christ had already died: ***"Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out."*** (John 19:32 - 34)

### **Vs. 55 & 56:**

Some women who had been among Christ's followers and who had served Him financially, accompanied Him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

They included Mary Magdalene, from whom Christ had exorcized seven demons, Mary the wife of Clopas, the holy virgin's sister, and Salome the mother of James and John, Zebedee's sons. They watched the proceedings from a distance, either fearing the Jews, or because the soldiers sent them away. Their love motivated them to follow all the proceedings unto the end.

+ *God reveals to you signs throughout your life, so that you may believe on Him and submit to His will. You can discern those signs if you observed regularly prayers, fasts, reading the holy books, and partaking of the holy*

sacraments. Having understood, do not neglect God's messages - rather, let them be your motive for repentance and for strengthening your relationship with God.

**(X) Christ's burial (vs. 57 - 61)**

*"Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him. When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed. And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb."* (Matthew 27:57 - 61)

**Vs. 57 & 58:**

Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, was one of Christ's followers/disciples. He hailed from Arimathea - a village in Jerusalem's proximity. He was among the Jewish elders - a member of the council of seventy. He had disagreed with the elders' decision to have Christ crucified (Luke 23:51).

Using his clout, he boldly and faithfully *"went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus"* after Christ's death. Naturally, this act exposed him to potential aggressive repercussions from Pilate and the Jews, since it proved his close ties with Christ. However, he was fearless, God protected him, and he was unharmed.

**V. 59:**

In John 19:39, we read that Nicodemus, who had believed on Christ, joined Joseph in caring for Christ's body. Fearing the Jews, he had concealed his faith. He brought with him *"a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds."* They embalmed the body, then Joseph *"wrapped it in a clean linen cloth."*

It is worth noting that the use of linen was particular for the wealthy - Christ was the King of kings; also, linen was the material for the priests' attire - Christ was the High Priest Who offered Himself as a Sacrifice on the Cross.

**V. 60:**

Also in John 19:41 & 42 we read that Joseph and Nicodemus laid Christ in Joseph's *"new tomb in which no one had yet been laid"* in a garden, *"in the place where He was crucified."* Likely, Joseph owned that garden, and he had probably prepared that tomb for himself. That constituted Divine

economy to confirm Christ's resurrection: there were no other bodies or bones in that tomb that could have been mistakenly assumed to have risen. Furthermore, Joseph ***"rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed."*** The stone could not be moved easily, and it was to ensure the disciples' inability to steal the body quietly, unbeknownst to the soldiers.

#### **V. 61:**

Out of their love for Christ, some women continued to watch the proceedings - hence, His burial. The holy Bible mentions that among those women were Mary Magdalene and another Mary, to whom St. Mark refers as ***"Mary the mother of Joses."*** (Mark 15:47) Furthermore, St. Luke says, ***"And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment."*** (Luke 23:55 & 56) And St. John says, ***"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."*** (John 19:25) + *Your love of God will motivate you to scrutinize your lifestyle and follow Him - not only during times of relaxation, but also during hardships. You should adhere to His commandments, boldly proclaiming your love for Him, regardless of the extent of evil-doers' rejection of His ways.*

#### **(XI) Sealing the tomb (vs. 62 - 66)**

***"On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard."*** (Matthew 26:62 - 66)

#### **Vs. 62 - 64:**

***"The chief priests and Pharisees"*** - Those were the Sanhedrin members.  
***"That deceiver"*** - Being fixated on evil, they continued to call Christ ***"that deceiver,"*** despite their having witnessed the earthquake and the darkness. The Jews called Friday "Preparation Day" - meaning preparation for Saturday. Following Christ's burial on Friday evening (hence, at the beginning of Saturday), the chief priests and Pharisees remembered what

Christ had said about His resurrection: "***Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple (He was referring to His body), and in three days I will raise it up.'***" (John 2:19) They had probably learnt from one of Christ's disciples what He had said about His resurrection on the third day (Chapter 16:21). They feared that the disciples might steal the body and claim that He had risen. Thus, they went and informed Pilate about their "concerns" and asked him to "***command that the tomb be made secure until the third day.***" This implied sealing the tomb and setting guards. They failed to realize that, in so doing, they were confirming His resurrection on the third day - despite the seal and the guards.

"The last deception" - They considered that all of Christ's teaching were pure deceptions to the people. Therefore, if the disciples stole the body and claim that He had risen, they would be deceiving the people more than when Christ was amongst them.

**Vs. 65 & 66:**

Pilate permitted them to set a guard, "***So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard*** (Roman soldiers)."

Naturally, they did everything meticulously to ensure that the disciples would be incapable of stealing the body.

+ *Do not be perturbed by evil-doers' tricks and power. God will transform everything to your advantage and prove your righteousness.*

## Chapter 28

### Christ's resurrection - His appearance to His disciples

#### (I) The empty tomb (vs. 1 - 10)

*"Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you." So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.""* (Matthew 28:1 - 10)

#### V. 1:

Being the Jews' day of rest, Christ's followers were prohibited from going to Him on the Sabbath, although their hearts clung to Him. Therefore, at dawn on Sunday, two women hastened to the tomb - they were *"Mary Magdalene and the other Mary."* It is believed that the *"other Mary"* was the wife of Clopas - although Matthew did not mention it, likely, because his gospel was addressed to the Jews who considered relatives' testimony to be inadmissible. The two women aimed to cast just a quick glance on their Beloved's tomb, Whom Mary Magdalene had accompanied for three years.

#### V. 2:

Due to the great love which drove the two women to visit Christ's tomb, He awarded them a much greater reward than they had anticipated: upon arrival at the tomb, a magnificent angel, whose light shone as bright as lightning, greeted them, proclaiming Christ's resurrection to all humanity (the Coptic Orthodox Church assumes that he was the Archangel Michael.) He *"rolled back the stone from the door"* (that was accompanied by a *"great earthquake"*), *and sat on it."* As mentioned earlier, the earthquake could

be symbolic of shaking off all the world's lusts, while starting a new life for God's children, hence, believers on His resurrection. The angel then sat on the stone in great splendor.

Christ's resurrection, unseen by anyone, had preceded that encounter. Furthermore, at His resurrection, the stone had remained blocking the tomb's door; Archangel Michael rolled it back, revealing the empty tomb while proclaiming Christ's resurrection to mankind.

*+ Rest assured that for each expression of love you offer to God, He showers you with unimaginable love and blessings. Therefore, do not belittle your modest prayers, or your failure to understand fully your readings of the scriptures, or your limited service. All of those are precious in God's view, and He rewards you for them with unexpected bounties.*

#### **Vs. 3 & 4:**

The angel's appearance was indeed splendid, as his light shown with unutterable magnificence - likened by St. Matthew unto the brightness of lightening. His garment was as white as snow. The guards were terrified by his appearance, by the earthquake, and by the rolling of the stone - God's might terrifies evil-doers.

#### **Vs. 5 & 6:**

Fear descended upon the guards; on the other hand, the angel comforted the Marys - Christ's believers - proclaiming Christ's resurrection, and referring to Him as "***Jesus Who was crucified.***" He is at once the Crucified and the Resurrected, accentuating His infinite love unto death and, simultaneously, His power through His resurrection. The angel showed them proof of Christ's resurrection, namely, the empty tomb.

#### **Vs. 7 & 8:**

The angel granted the Marys the privilege of announcing Christ's resurrection to the disciples, as well as His instruction to proceed to meet Him in Galilee, in Judea's north. There, the disciples had been accustomed to walk with Christ, listening to His teaching and witnessing His miracles. The Marys were at once awed and perturbed by the scene's splendor and the annunciation - they were overwhelmed to learn that their Beloved had risen from the dead and returned to them. Since we read, "***So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and joy,***" we conclude that their discussion with the angel had taken place inside the tomb.

The Marys hastened to announce the news to the disciples. Behold, whereas the woman incited man to fall into sin in the Garden of Eden, now, the woman is announcing Christ's resurrection and new life with Him.

+ *By channeling your love towards deeds of worship and service, you will please God, and that love will redirect you from evil to good.*

That constituted the first visit to the tomb. Some of the Church's forefathers enumerated the visits to Christ's tomb as follows:

1. One visit was by the two Marys, one of whom was Mary Magdalene (see verses 1 - 8). There is some speculation that the "**other Mary**" to whom St. Matthew refers might have been the Lord's mother, or Clopas' wife - Christ's aunt. As mentioned earlier, being Christ's relatives, their testimony would have been inadmissible. During this visit, they met Jesus, held His feet, and worshipped Him.
2. A second visit to the tomb is recorded in John 20:1. That time, Mary Magdalene was alone, "**and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.**" John also mentions that she "**went to the tomb early, while it was still dark.**" We can thus infer that dawn was creeping over the earth from the east, while the west was still shrouded in darkness.
3. A third visit was from Mary Magdalene. Following her return to Jerusalem, she informed the disciples as instructed by the angel, then she returned to the tomb accompanied by Peter and John. They saw the empty tomb and departed, having fully believed on His resurrection. Mary remained by the tomb, and saw Christ. He told her, "**Do not cling to Me.**" (John 20:17)
4. The fourth visit, also at dawn and elucidated in Luke 24:1 - 10, was by several women, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. They "**came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb.**" The resurrection was annunciated to them by two angels.
5. A fifth visit, at dawn, is recorded in Mark 16:1 - 8. It was a visit by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. They saw the empty tomb; the angel annunciated the resurrection to them.

#### **Vs. 9 & 10:**

God multiplies His blessings to those who love Him. Thus, the risen Christ appears in Person to the Marys, and grants them peace. The gift of peace is unique to God's children. The Marys' joy was so great, that they "**held Him by the feet and worshipped Him**" in all humility. Christ's love for us, attracts us to worship Him humbly, and to experience His closeness to us throughout our lives. Out of His love for them, and being the first to visit the tomb, He reaffirmed their task of proclaiming His resurrection to the Church - hence, to the disciples.

It is truly amazing....the almighty Christ, Who had risen from the dead, humbles Himself referring to the disciples as His "**brethren,**" while stating

that He would precede them to Galilee, to await them, gladden their hearts, and rejoice at their meeting.

**"Do not be afraid"** - Christ comforted the women, since they had mixed feelings of fear and joy, and they had not expected to see the resurrected Christ. That was Christ's first appearance following His resurrection.

The holy Bible records the following instances of Christ's appearances, during the period from His resurrection up till His ascension:

1. He appeared to Mary Magdalene and **"the other Mary"** (some believe it could have been the Lord's mother) - see Matthew 28:9 and Mark 16:9.
2. He appeared solely to Mary Magdalene and told her, **"Do not cling to Me."** (John 20:17).
3. He appeared to Peter "Cephas." (Luke 24:34 and 1 Corinthians 15:5)
4. He appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on resurrection day (Mark 16:12 and Luke 24:15).
5. He appeared to the disciples on resurrection day evening, in the upper room (Luke 24:26), and in John 20:19 - 24 we read that Thomas was absent.
6. Eight days after His appearance in Thomas' absence, He appeared again to the disciples in the upper room - this time, Thomas was present (John 20:26).
7. He appeared to the disciples in Galilee by Lake Tiberias (John 21:1).
8. He appeared to the disciples in Galilee (see verse 16 below).
9. He appeared to more than five hundred brethren (1 Corinthians 15:6).
10. He appeared to the apostle James, then to all the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:7).
11. He appeared to the disciples at His ascension (Mark 16:19, Luke 24:50 & 51, Matthew 28:16 & 17 and Acts 1:3 - 9).

In Acts 1:3, we read that Christ appeared many more times, during the forty days following His resurrection - though the holy Bible does not mention specific times.

## **(II) Bribing the soldiers (vs. 11 - 15)**

***"Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, 'Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure.'" So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.*"** (Matthew 28:11 - 15)

**V. 11:**

During the Marys' return to Jerusalem, some of the troops who had been guarding the tomb went to the chief priests and reported everything that had transpired; hence, they told them about the resurrection, the angel's appearance and the empty tomb. Unfortunately, and ironically, the chief priests refused to believe on the risen Christ - behold, the Gentiles (the troops) announced to the Jewish priests Christ's resurrection, and they refused to believe....the converse should have been expected: the Jews should have preached the risen Christ, the awaited Messiah, to the Gentiles! When the chief priests had gone to Pilate asking for the tomb to be sealed, they had referred to Christ as "*that deceiver*," fearing what He had said about rising three days following His death (see Chapter 27:62 - 65). When He rose as He had said, they refused to believe.

+ *Accept God's message - even if sent through ungodly people. Repent, and return humbly to God.*

**Vs. 12 - 14:**

"*The elders*" - Those were the Sanhedrin members.

"*Consulted together*" - They tried to find an explanation for the absence of Christ's body from the tomb, so that they may deceive people about His resurrection.

Not only did the elders and chief priests reject the Faith, but they also conspired to resist His resurrection! Therefore, they bribed the soldiers who were guarding the tomb, so that they may allege that the disciples had stolen the body at night, while they slept.

Furthermore, they told the soldiers that, in the event of Pilate's finding out and becoming angry with them, the chief priests would use their clout to calm him, so that no harm would befall them. They relied on people's trait of loving money to the extent that they would lie for it.

**V. 15:**

The soldiers took the bribe - the silver - and spread what the chief priests had told them to say. The news of Christ's stolen body thus spread around Judea. However, that story defies logic:

- How could a group of weak unarmed disciples overpower armed soldiers?
- How could the soldiers remain asleep during the rolling of such a large stone, and the body's robbery?
- How could the soldiers find out what had happened during their sleep?

Thus, Divine economy induced the high priests to help, unwillingly, in spreading the news of Christ's resurrection.

**"Until this day"** - That refers to the time when St. Matthew authored his gospel - which was about thirty years after Christ's resurrection.

### **(III) Christ's appearance to His disciples (vs. 16 - 20)**

***"Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen."***

(Matthew 28:16 - 20)

#### **Vs. 16 & 17:**

The disciples hastened joyfully to Galilee to see their beloved Teacher on ***"the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them."***

When Christ appeared to them, they worshipped Him, and rejoiced to see Him. However, we do read in John 20:24 - 26 that one of them, Thomas, doubted Christ's appearance - that doubt vanished when Christ appeared a second time in the upper room the Sunday following His resurrection, when Thomas was present with the disciples.

***"But some doubted"*** - That doubt represented human weakness - which was the case with Thomas. However, Christ reaffirmed His resurrection by appearing several times, strengthening their belief.

#### **Vs. 18 & 19:**

***"All authority has been given to Me"*** - During His life on earth, Christ's weakness as a human being was demonstrated. He suffered and died for us. After His resurrection, He appears to us in the authority of His Divinity. For this reason He told His disciples ***"All authority has been given to Me;"*** the authority of My Divinity will be evinced to you on earth and in heaven.

***"Make disciples"*** - This means ***"Preach to, and teach, people, the Faith in Christ."***

***"All the nations"*** - This means that salvation is for the entire world not merely for the Jews.

Christ granted His Divine authority to His disciples through the Sacrament of Holy Orders (Priesthood). He gave them the power to teach the entire world the sound Faith pertaining to His death and resurrection. Furthermore, He

entrusted to His disciples the spiritual care and discipleship of those to whom they preach, plus the task of granting them the first sacrament, namely, the Sacrament of Baptism in the name of the all-holy Trinity. That proclaimed, clearly, the priesthood's authority which Christ granted to His disciples, and their successors, for promulgating the holy sacraments throughout the world.

**V. 20:**

Once the disciples have baptized a convert, they undertake his mentoring, through spiritual teaching, and conduct in accordance with Christ's commandments. At the same time, Christ affirmed His support for the disciples, and for all His New Testament priests and servants, unto the end of time - hence, He will never, ever, forsake His children.

*+ Since God is with us, we must never be perturbed; rather, we should advance, confidently, not only towards the fulfillment of His commandments, but also towards preaching His love to others.*

Christ's resurrection is abundantly evinced; the following are some examples of such evidence:

1. He appeared numerous times - not merely once - following His resurrection.
2. He appeared to different people - hence, reliance is not on the testimony of one person; in one of those instances, more than five hundred brethren were present.
3. He appeared at different times of day - thus facilitating confirmation of His identity.
4. His appearances spanned forty days - hence, there was ample time to confirm that it was really Christ.
5. Those to whom He appeared were able to see and hear Him - He even dined with them.
6. Christ's disciples and followers were not expecting His resurrection; His resurrection was thus neither imagined nor inspired - they were amazed to learn of His resurrection, which He confirmed by appearing many times.
7. The disciples' belief on His resurrection was so strong, that they preached it over the whole world, enduring much suffering - even unto death. No one will sacrifice their life for the sake of a fantasy that he had invented.