

THE BEATITUDES

THOMAS WATSON



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Thomas Watson



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A rich series of expository sermons on Christ's **Sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5), exploring each of the eight Beatitudes with pastoral depth and Puritan precision. Watson examines **poverty of spirit**, mourning, meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, **purity of heart**, peacemaking, and suffering for Christ — showing how each virtue leads to genuine blessedness. Accompanied by additional discourses on the soul, grace, hope, love, and practical obedience, the work is a comprehensive guide to **Christian character and heavenly happiness**.



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DEDICATION TO THE EARL AND COUNTESS OF CLARE



The many kindnesses and favors I have received from your honors have placed me under a significant debt of gratitude, and I could think of no better way to express that gratitude than by presenting you with this work as a token of the deep respect and service I owe you both. My Lord, the soul is a blossom of eternity — what should weigh more heavily on us than those things that help raise the soul to its fullness of happiness and let it shine in its true splendor? Birth may make a person noble, and learning may adorn them, but religion places the crown of salvation on a person's head. In this lies true wisdom. My Lord, the study of the subject I offer to your view here will, by God's blessing, greatly advance and encourage the true progress of religion. Consider the author of this Sermon on the Mount — one greater than Solomon is here. Christ Himself is the preacher. His lips have always dropped sweetness like a honeycomb, and this is especially true in these divine teachings. The duties He prescribes here are weighty, and the rewards He promises are glorious. Here we see a Christian clothed in the white linen of purity and the scarlet robe of blessedness. Here we see grace and glory meeting together and embracing each other. Let no one ever think to reach heaven without climbing this

Jacob's ladder. If you would be rich, you must be poor in spirit. If you would enjoy happiness, you must embrace holiness. My Lord, I could not be as thorough as I wished in treating this subject, having much other work on my hands — but I know your noble generosity will lead you to overlook rather than criticize whatever you find lacking. I will not preface it further. Requesting your Lordship's patronage and gracious acceptance of these unpolished efforts of mine, I will remain a sincere petitioner at the throne of grace for all heavenly blessings upon you, your nobly descended family, and remain

Your Lordship's humble servant in Christ, Thomas Watson.
From my study at St. Walbrook, July 6, 1660.

THE BEATITUDES: A DISCOURSE
UPON CHRIST'S SERMON ON THE
MOUNT



Matthew 5:1-2: And seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain. And when He was seated, His disciples came to Him. And He opened His mouth and taught them.

CHAPTER 1



An introduction to the following discourse.

The blessed Evangelist Matthew, who wrote this sacred history, was by trade a tax collector. When Christ called him away from that customs booth, He made him a collector of souls instead. In the first chapter, this holy man records Christ's birth and genealogy. In the second, he records His dignity — a star led the wise men to Him, and He was presented with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh as a king (Matthew 2:9, 11). In the third chapter, the Evangelist records His baptism; in the fourth, His temptations; and in the fifth, His preaching. That fifth chapter is like a rich mine — every vein holds gold. There are four things in this chapter that stand out for our attention.

- 1. The preacher. - 2. The pulpit. - 3. The occasion. - 4. The sermon.

1. The preacher. Jesus Christ. The greatest preacher who ever lived.

He went up — He, in whom every virtue was combined and every beauty gathered together; He whose lips were not only sweet as a honeycomb but constantly dripping with sweetness; He whose words were an oracle, whose works were miracles, whose life was a

pattern, whose death was a sacrifice. He went up into a mountain and taught. Jesus Christ was fully equipped and qualified for the work of ministry in every way.

1. Christ was an intelligent preacher. He had the Spirit without measure (John 3:34), and He knew how to speak the right word at the right time — when to humble and when to comfort. We cannot know all the faces of our listeners; Christ knew the hearts of His. He understood what teaching would best suit each person, just as a farmer knows what kind of seed is right for a particular soil.

2. Christ was a powerful preacher. He spoke with authority (Matthew 7:29). He could confront people with their sins and show them their own hearts (John 4:29). "Come, see a man who told me all the things I have ever done." The best mirror is not the one most richly set with pearls, but the one that shows the truest reflection. Christ preached to the conscience. He breathed as much zeal as eloquence, and He often struck at the deepest parts of the heart. What was said of Luther applies far more truly to Christ: He spoke as though He were speaking from inside a person. He could drive the wedge of His teaching into the hardest heart, and with His two-edged sword He was able to pierce even a heart of stone. "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks" (John 7:46).

3. Christ was a successful preacher. He had the gift of converting souls. John 10:40: Many believed in Him, including people of rank and standing (John 12:42). Even among the chief rulers, many believed. He who had grace poured into His lips (Psalm 45:2) could pour grace into His listeners' hearts. He held the Key of David in His hand, and whenever He chose, He opened people's

hearts and made a way for both Himself and His teaching to enter. When He sounded the trumpet, even His enemies came under His banner — at His summons, none dared do anything but surrender.

4. Christ was a lawful preacher. As He had His anointing from the Father, so also He had His sending (John 8:18). "The Father who sent Me bears witness of Me." Christ, in whom all perfections were centered, still submitted to being formally commissioned and set apart for His ministry office as well as His mediatorial office. If Jesus Christ would not begin the work of ministry without a commission, how brazenly presumptuous are those who dare invade this sacred office without any warrant? There must be a lawful entry into the ministry. Hebrews 5:4: No one takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was. Our Lord Christ gave not only Apostles and Prophets — who were extraordinary ministers — but also Pastors and Teachers, who were appointed in the ordinary way (Ephesians 4:11). And He intends for a ministry to continue perpetually (Matthew 28:20). "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Ordination is just as necessary today as it was in Christ's time and the time of the Apostles — in fact more so, since the extraordinary gifts that were present in the church then have now ceased.

Objection 1: But why should the ministry not be open to everyone? Has the Lord spoken only through Moses (Numbers 12:2)? Why should one person preach any better than another?

Answer: Because God, who is a God of order, has made the work of ministry a distinct and separate office from any other. In the human body, each member has its own function — the eye sees, the hand works. You might as well ask, why shouldn't the hand see as well as the eye? Because God made that distinction —

He placed the faculty of sight in one and not the other. In the same way, God has made a distinction between the work of ministry and other kinds of work.

Question: Where is this distinction in Scripture?

Answer 1: Scripture clearly distinguishes between pastor and people (1 Peter 5:2). "The elders — or ministers — I exhort: feed the flock of God that is among you." If anyone could preach, then by the same reasoning everyone could, and what would become of the distinction the Apostle makes? Where would the flock of God be if everyone were a pastor?

2. God has assigned the minister specific work that belongs to him and to no one else. 1 Timothy 4:13: "Give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" — give yourself entirely to these things. In the Greek, the sense is: be wholly in them. This charge is given specifically to the minister and applies to no one else. The merchant is not told to give himself entirely to doctrine and exhortation — let him attend to his business. The farmer is not told to give himself entirely to preaching — let him attend to his fields. This is the minister's charge. The Apostle speaks to Timothy, and through him to all those on whom the hands of the Presbytery were laid. And in 2 Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." This is spoken specifically to the minister. Not everyone who can read the word correctly can also divide it correctly. Therefore the work of ministry does not belong to everyone — it is a distinct and special calling. Just as no one but the priests could touch the ark, no one may take up this office in God's house except those who are called to it.

Objection 2: But if a man has gifts, isn't that enough? My answer is no. Just as grace alone is not enough to make someone a minister, neither are gifts alone. Scripture draws a distinction between being gifted and being sent (Romans 10:15). "How will they preach unless they are sent?" If gifts were enough to make someone a minister, the Apostle should have written, "How will they preach unless they are gifted?" But he wrote "unless they are sent." The same principle holds in other fields: gifts don't make a magistrate. A lawyer who argues cases at the bar may be just as gifted as the judge on the bench, but he must have a commission before he can sit as judge. If this is true in civil affairs, it applies even more to church matters, which Bucer rightly calls things of the highest importance. Those who seize the work of ministry without any proper appointment and calling show more pride than zeal. They act outside their sphere and are guilty of a kind of theft — they steal their way into a congregation. And as they come without a call, so they remain without a blessing. Jeremiah 23:32: "I did not send them, therefore they will not profit this people at all." And that is enough on the first point: the preacher.

2. The pulpit where Christ preached: He went up into a mountain.

The law was first given on a mountain, and here Christ expounds it on a mountain. This mountain is believed by Jerome and other scholars to have been Mount Tabor. It was a practical place to speak from — elevated above the people and well-suited to the large crowd that had gathered.

3. The occasion of Christ's going up the mountain: He saw the multitude.

The people pressed forward to hear Christ, and He would not dismiss the crowd without a sermon — seeing the multitude, He went up. Jesus Christ came from heaven as an agent sent to win souls. He spent His time on earth preaching as His primary business. The people could not be as eager to hear as He was to preach. He who had compassion on weary bodies (Matthew 15:32) had far greater compassion on dead souls. It was His food and drink to do His Father's will (John 4:34). And seeing the multitude, He went up the mountain and preached. He did this not only for the benefit of His listeners, but as a pattern for His ministers to follow.

Doctrine: From this, observe that Christ's ministers must follow Christ's pattern and seize every opportunity to do good to souls. Praying, preaching, and studying must be their constant work (2 Timothy 4:2). "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season." Peter, seeing the multitude, cast the net — and in one catch pulled in three thousand souls (Acts 2:41). How zealously and tirelessly God's champions have labored in former ages to fulfill the work of their ministry — Chrysostom, Augustine, Basil the Great, Calvin, Bucer, and others who came near to death for the sake of Christ's work. The reasons why Christ's ministers should be intensely eager to seize every opportunity for soul-service are these:

1. Their commission: God has entrusted them as ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador waits for the day of an audience, and as soon as it is granted, he faithfully and fully delivers the message of his king. In the same way, Christ's ministers, having been commissioned to negotiate for souls, should be glad whenever a day of audience comes — so they can deliver the mind and will of Christ to His people.

2. Their titles. 1. Ministers are called God's sowers (1 Corinthians 9:11), so they must use every opportunity to scatter the blessed seed of the word. The sower goes out and sows. Yes, even if the seed falls on rocky ground — as it often does — we must still sow, scattering the word on stony hearts, because God is able to raise up children for Himself even from those stones. 2. Ministers are called stars, so they must shine through word and teaching in the sky of the church. Our Lord Christ set this example in the text: seeing the multitude, He went up the mountain — a light set on a hill, the bright morning star shining to all around. Christ calls His ministers "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14), so they must be always giving off their light. That light must not go out until it is spent in the socket, or until a violent death extinguishes it.

3. Christ's ministers must seize every opportunity to do good, because of the great importance of what they are doing — saving souls. How precious is a soul? Christ places the whole world on one side of a scale and the soul on the other, and the soul outweighs it (Matthew 16:26). The soul has a noble origin and a lively energy. It is a flower of eternity — here still in bud, but in heaven fully bloomed. The soul is one of the richest works of embroidery God ever made: the mind lit up with understanding, the will clothed with freedom, the affections like musical instruments tuned by the finger of the Holy Spirit. The soul is Christ's partner and the companion of angels. If souls are of such noble origin and made capable of glory, how zealously and tirelessly should Christ's ministers labor to save them! If Christ spent His blood for souls, surely we can spend our sweat. It was Augustine's prayer that

Christ would find him either praying or preaching at the hour of his death. What a tragic sight it is to see precious souls — like pearls and diamonds — cast into the dead sea of hell.

4. The ministers of Christ must go up the mountain when they see the multitude, because Satan has so many agents actively working to destroy souls. How does the ancient serpent pour floods of water from his mouth after the woman, trying to sweep her away (Revelation 12:15)? Floods of heresy have been poured out across cities and countryside, overflowing the banks of not only religion but basic morality. Ignatius called error "the devil's invention," and Bernard called it "a sweet poison." People's ears, like sponges, have soaked up this poison. Satan's goods have never been more marketable in England than now. A smooth tongue can move bad merchandise. The Jesuit can coat his lies in silver and dress error in truth's clothing. A weak mind is easily intoxicated. When flattery and cleverness meet with the simple, they become easy prey. The Roman church entices many to swallow the poison of her idolatry and wickedness, because it is served in a golden cup (Revelation 17:4). If all who had the plague of false doctrine were to die, the death toll would rise sharply. Since Satan has so many agents at work trying to win converts to the Church of Rome, how urgent it is for those whom God has placed in the work of ministry to stir themselves and seize every opportunity — so that through their spiritual remedies they may turn sinners from the error of their ways and save their souls from death (James 5, last verse)! Ministers must be not only shepherds but fighters. In one hand they must hold the bread of life and feed God's flock; in the other, they must hold the sword of the Spirit and fight against the errors that carry damnation openly with them.

5. Christ's ministers should pursue every opportunity for soul-service because the preaching of the word faces so many obstacles to its progress and success. No pilot ever encountered as many contrary winds on a voyage as God's spiritual pilots face when they are bringing souls safely to heaven.

1. Some listeners have poor memories (James 1:25). Their memories are like leaking vessels — all the precious wine of holy teaching that is poured in runs right out. Ministers cannot find truth through study as fast as others can lose it. If food does not stay in the stomach, it can never produce healthy blood. If a truth that is preached does not stay in the memory, we can never be, as the Apostle says, "nourished on the words of faith" (1 Timothy 4:6). How often does the devil — that bird of the air — swoop down and pick up the good seed that was sown! If thieves steal people's money, they tell everyone and report that they have been robbed. But there is a worse thief they are unaware of. How many sermons has the devil stolen from them! How many truths have been robbed from them — truths that could have been a comfort in their dying hour! Since the preached word slips so easily from memory, ministers need to go up the preaching mountain more often, so that at last some truth will take hold and remain, fastened like a nail by the masters of assemblies.

2. Many listeners have their ears stopped up with earth — meaning the worries of the world — so that the preached word never enters. This is what the parable describes: "Hearing they do not hear" (Matthew 13:13). We read of Saul: his eyes were open, yet he saw no one (Acts 9:8). What a strange paradox! Yet is it not just as strange that men's ears should be open, yet in hearing they do not hear? They pay no attention to what is said. Ezekiel 33:31:

"They come before you as My people, but their heart goes after their covetousness." Many people sit staring at the minister's face yet scarcely know a word he has said. They are thinking about their goods and their profits, mentally tallying up accounts in the middle of the church service. If a man is inside a mill, you can shout as loudly as you want, but he cannot hear you over the noise of the mill. We preach to people about matters of salvation, but the noise of worldly business is so loud they cannot hear. In hearing, they do not hear. Since this is how it is, ministers — who are called sons of thunder — need to go up the mountain often and lift their voice like a trumpet, so that the deaf ear may be opened and may hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 2:7).

3. Others, as they have earth in their ears, have a stone in their hearts. Zechariah 7:12: "They made their hearts like flint, so that they could not hear the law." Christ's ministers must therefore constantly brandish the sword of the Spirit and strike at people's sins, hoping to finally pierce even a heart of stone. When ground is scorched by the sun, it becomes so hard and crusted that a single rainstorm will not soften it. Shower after shower is needed before it will become moist or fertile. The human heart in its natural state is just such a hardened thing — it is so stiffened by the scorching of lust that precept upon precept is required (Isaiah 28:10). Our teaching must fall like dew, like the gentle rain on new grass, and like showers upon tender plants (Deuteronomy 32:2).

6. Christ's ministers should follow their Lord's example and seize every opportunity to do good — not only for God's glory, but for their own lasting comfort. What a triumph it will be, and what cause for joy, when a minister can say on his deathbed: "Lord, I have finished the work You gave me to do. I have been trading for

souls!" When a minister arrives at the mount of glory — the heavenly mountain — it will be a great comfort to him that he spent so much time on the preaching mountain. Certainly if the angels in heaven rejoice over the conversion of one sinner (Luke 15), how much more will that minister rejoice in heaven over every soul he was used to convert? Every convert gained will not only add a member to Christ's body but a jewel to a minister's crown (Daniel 12:3). Those who are wise — or as the original Hebrew carries it, those who are teachers — will shine not as lamps or candles, but as stars; not as planets, but as fixed stars in the sky of glory forever.

And even if Israel is not gathered, God's ministers will still be honored in His sight (Isaiah 49:5). God will reward them not according to their success, but according to their faithfulness. Even when they are the fragrance of death to those who reject the message, they are still a sweet fragrance to God. In an orchard, the laborer who cuts down a tree is paid just as much as the one who plants one. The surgeon's bill is paid even if the patient dies.

Use 1: Allow me to speak a word to my honored brothers in the ministry. You are engaged in a glorious work, and God has placed great honor upon you. He has entrusted you with the two most precious things He owns: His truth and the souls of His people. No angel has ever been given the honor of converting souls. What royal dignity can compare to this? The pulpit stands higher than the throne, for a rightly appointed minister represents no less than God Himself. 2 Corinthians 5:20: "As though God were making His appeal through us, we beg you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God." Allow me to say with the Apostle (Romans 11:13): I magnify my office. Whatever our personal shortcomings, the office itself is sacred. The ministry is the most honorable calling in the

world. Jesus Christ honored this calling by entering it Himself. Other people work in their trades, but ministers work with God. 1 Corinthians 3:9: "For we are fellow workers with God." What an extraordinary honor! God and His ministers share one and the same work — both are engaged in the business of souls. Let the sons of the prophets wear this as their crown and dignity. But while I speak of your honor, do not forget your duty. Follow the blessed pattern in this text: the Lord Jesus, who — seeing the multitudes — went up and taught. He seized every opportunity to preach. Sometimes He taught in the temple (Mark 14:49), sometimes in a boat (Mark 4:1), and here on the mountain. His lips were a tree of life that fed many. How often did He forgo His own food so that He could feast others with His teaching! Let all ministers of Christ walk in His steps. Make Christ not only your Savior but your example. Let no opportunity pass where you can help the souls of others. Do not be satisfied to reach heaven yourselves alone — be like the first sphere in the heavens, which draws all the other spheres along with it. Be such shining lights that you lead others to heaven alongside you. I will close with the Apostle's words (1 Corinthians 15:58): "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

Use 2: Let me now turn to the flock of God. If ministers must seize every opportunity to preach, then you must seize every opportunity to hear. If a certain sum of money were being distributed to all who came, two or three times a week, people would flock there without fail. Think of it this way: when the word of God is preached, the bread of life is being distributed — something more precious than thousands of pieces of gold or silver (Psalm 119:72).

In the preached word, heaven and salvation are offered to you. In this field, the pearl of great price lies hidden. How eagerly you should flock like doves to the windows of the sanctuary (Isaiah 60:8)! We read that the gate of the temple was called Beautiful (Acts 3:2). The gate of God's house is the beautiful gate — take up your place at wisdom's door (Proverbs 8:34).

Branch 2: Not only hear the preached word, but also support the ministers who preach it. 1. Support them financially. Though I trust that all who have God's calling written on their hearts can say with the Apostle (2 Corinthians 12:14), "I am not seeking what is yours, but you," that Scripture still stands (1 Corinthians 9:14): "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." Are not workers in a vineyard supported by their work? asks Peter Martyr. And the Apostle raises the question: "Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit?" (1 Corinthians 9:7). Hypocrites love a cheap religion. They want a gospel that costs them nothing. They are content to have golden purses and wooden priests. How many have saved their money only to lose their souls! Julian the Apostate robbed the ministers under the pretense of conscience. I need not remind you of how vengeance caught up with him. Is it not a tragedy that the fire on God's altar should go out for lack of a little golden oil being poured on it? David refused to offer God what cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24:24).

2. Encourage God's ministers by bearing fruit under their ministry. When ministers go up the mountain, let them not be preaching to rocks. How much has God invested in this city! I believe there has not been a more learned, orthodox, and powerful ministry since the days of the Apostles than there is now. God's minis-

ters are called stars (Revelation 1:20). In this city, a star appears every morning, and a bright constellation on the Lord's Day. You who feed in the green pastures of the ordinances — be nourished and fruitful. You who are planted in the courts of God, flourish there (Psalm 92:13). How tragic it will be for a people who go laden with gospel blessings all the way to hell! The best way to encourage your ministers is to let them see the fruit of their labor in your new birth. It is a great comfort when a minister not only woos souls but wins them (Proverbs 11:30). "He who wins souls is wise." This is a minister's glory (1 Thessalonians 2:19): "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting?" "Is it not even you?" A fruitful preacher wears two crowns — a crown of righteousness in heaven, and a crown of joy here on earth. "Are you not our crown?"

3. Encourage your ministers by praying for them. Their work is great — it demands their mind and heart fully, and even then it is barely enough. It is work more suited to angels than to men. "Who is adequate for these things?" (2 Corinthians 2:16). Please pray for them. When Christ went up the mountain to preach, He had no need of the people's prayers. He had an inexhaustible supply in His divine nature to sustain Him. But all those who serve under Him in the ministry need prayer. If the Apostle Paul — who overflowed with the graces of the Spirit and received supernatural revelations — asked for prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:25), how much more do other ministers who make no claim to such revelations. Pray for your ministers, that God will direct them in what to preach and shape their work for them. Pray that God will accompany their labors, for without that, they work hard and catch nothing. It is not the hand that scatters the seed that makes it grow — it is the dew and blessing from heaven. So too, it is not our preaching

but the divine influence of the Spirit that makes grace grow in people's hearts. Pray for us, then, that God will make His work prosper through our hands.

1. Pray that God will direct them in what to preach and shape their work for them (Jonah 3:2): "Arise, go to Nineveh and proclaim to it the message which I tell you." It is no small thing to preach the right truths for the occasion — these are the acceptable words spoken of in Ecclesiastes 12:10.

2. Pray that God will go forth with their labors, for without that they work hard and catch nothing. God's Spirit must fill the sails of our ministry. It is not the hand that scatters the seed that makes it grow — it is the dew and blessing from heaven. In the same way, it is not our preaching but the divine influence of the Spirit that makes grace grow in people's hearts. We are merely pipes and instruments; it is God's Spirit blowing through us that causes the preaching of the word to draw souls to Christ with a kind of divine power. Ministers are only stars to guide you to Christ; it is the Spirit who is the magnet that draws you. All the good accomplished through our ministry comes from the power and grace of the Lord. Pray for us, then, that God will make His work prosper through our hands. This may be one reason why the preached word bears so little fruit — because people pray so little. Perhaps you complain that the tool is dull, that the minister is cold and lifeless. But you should have sharpened him through your prayers. If you want the door of blessing to open to you through our ministry, you must unlock it with the key of prayer.

CHAPTER 2



Showing that there is a blessedness yet to come.

Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Having dealt with the occasion, I come now to the fourth element: the sermon itself. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Christ does not open His Sermon on the Mount the way the law was delivered on the mount — with commands and threats, with the trumpet sounding, fire blazing, the earth shaking, and the hearts of the Israelites trembling with fear. Instead, our Savior — whose lips dropped sweetness like a honeycomb — begins with promises and blessings. The teaching of this heavenly teacher was so sweet and captivating that, like music, it could charm the most hardened hearts and draw even hearts of stone to Him. Let us begin, then, with the first word: Blessed.

If there is any knowledge worth having, it is the knowledge of true blessedness. To explore this, I will lay down two principles.

1. There is a blessedness that is coming — a blessedness held in reserve.
2. The godly are in some sense already blessed.

1. There is a blessedness held in reserve. God's people face many hard obstacles and discouraging trials along the way of faith. Their journey is not only long and tiring but dangerous, and their hearts are prone to despair. It is fitting, therefore, to set the crown of blessedness before them — to strengthen their courage and kindle their zeal. How many Scriptures carry this olive branch in their mouths — the good news of blessedness for believers! Matthew 24:46: "Blessed is that servant whom his master finds so doing when he comes." Matthew 25:34: "Come, you who are blessed by My Father." Blessedness is the fullness of a rational creature's existence. It is the sharpening stone of a Christian's diligence, the height of his ambition, the flower of his joy. Every person desires blessedness. Aquinas calls it the ultimate end — the target every person is aiming for, the center point to which all lines are drawn.

Millions of people are mistaken both about what blessedness is and about how to reach it. Some scholars have catalogued two hundred eighty-eight different opinions about blessedness — and every one of them has missed the mark. I will show first where blessedness does not lie, and then where it does.

1. Where blessedness does not lie: It is not found in the acquisition of worldly things. Happiness cannot be extracted from this world by any method. Christ does not say "blessed are the rich" or "blessed are the noble" — yet far too many people idolize these things. Through the fall, a man has lost not only his crown but his mind. How quickly he tries to find his happiness in external things! This calls to mind the definition some pagan philosophers gave of blessedness: having enough to live on and thriving well in the world. And are there not many who call themselves Christians who seem to hold this same philosophical opinion? If they have

worldly comfort and provision, they are ready to sing themselves a lullaby and say with that foolish man in the parable: "Soul, you have many goods stored up for many years. Take your ease" (Luke 12:19). But the tree of blessedness does not grow in an earthly garden. Has not God cursed the ground because of sin (Genesis 3:17)? Yet many keep digging here for happiness, as if they could extract a blessing from a curse. A man might as well try to draw oil from a flint or fire from water as to find blessedness in earthly things.

King Solomon attained more than any man. He was the most magnificent king who ever held a scepter. 1. His lineage: He came from the royal line — not only the line from which many kings descended, but the line from which Christ Himself came. Jesus Christ was of Solomon's own line and family, so that in terms of ancestry and nobility, no one could display a finer heritage. 2. His palace: It stood in Jerusalem, the most renowned city on earth. Jerusalem was so celebrated that it was called the city of God — the most famous capital in the world. "There the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord" (Psalm 122:4). 3. His wealth: His crown was loaded with jewels. He had treasuries of gold and precious stones, and made silver as common as street-side rocks (1 Kings 10:27). 4. His worldly pleasures: He enjoyed the best and fullest assortment of delights — lavish feasts, magnificent buildings, vineyards, fish ponds, and every kind of music to enchant and overwhelm the senses with pleasure. If a rare thing existed anywhere, it was fitting for King Solomon's court. He bathed himself in the perfumed waters of pleasure. 5. His wisdom: He was the oracle of his age. When the Queen of Sheba came to test him with hard questions, he answered all of them (1 Kings 10:3). He held a key of knowledge that could unlock the hidden cabinet of nature. If wisdom had ever

been lost, it could have been found in him, and the whole world could have lit its understanding at Solomon's lamp. He was an earthly angel. Anyone looking at his glory with worldly eyes would have been tempted to think Solomon had returned to the paradise from which Adam was driven — or had found another just as good. The world never smiled more generously on any man. Yet when Solomon gives his honest verdict, he tells us that the world has "vanity" written across its face, and that all those golden pleasures he enjoyed were nothing but a painted happiness — a glorious misery (Ecclesiastes 2:8). "Behold, all was vanity." Blessedness is too noble and delicate a plant to grow in the soil of this world.

That blessedness does not lie in outward things, I will demonstrate with five arguments.

1. Whatever cannot match the desires of the soul can never make a person blessed. Temporal things cannot match the soul's desires. Therefore they cannot make anyone blessed. Nothing on earth can satisfy. Ecclesiastes 5:10: "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money." Riches cannot satisfy.

1. Because they are not real. The world is called a "fashion" (1 Corinthians 7:31). The Greek word signifies a mathematical figure — sometimes a show or apparition. Riches are only plated over. They are like cheap metal that glitters in the eye for a moment, but at death all that shine is stripped away. Riches are sweetened lies, pleasant illusions — like a gilded cover that has not a single page of true comfort bound inside it.

2. Because they are not suitable. The soul is a spiritual thing; riches come from the earth. How can earthly things fill what is spiritual? A man might as well try to fill a chest with grace as fill

his heart with gold. Even if a man were given every pleasure the world offers — even if God built him a mansion among the stars — the restless eye of his unsatisfied mind would still be searching higher. He would be peering beyond the heavens for some hidden treasure he has not yet found. The soul's thirst is unquenchable until it drinks from the river of life and finds its rest in true blessedness.

2. Whatever cannot quiet the heart in a storm cannot lay claim to blessedness. Earthly things, no matter how many you pile up, cannot calm a troubled heart. Therefore they cannot make anyone blessed. If the spirit is wounded, can worldly things pour wine and oil into those wounds? If God stirs the conscience and it rises up against a person, can worldly comforts silence that fury? Is there any music to drive away an angry conscience? Outward things can no more heal the anguish of conscience than a silk stocking can cure a gouty leg. When Saul was in deep distress (1 Samuel 28:15), could all the jewels of his crown bring him comfort? If God's wrath is poured out like fire, and rocks are thrown down before Him (Nahum 1:6), can a bar of gold serve as a shield against that fire? Ezekiel 7:19: "They will throw their silver into the streets; their silver and gold will not be able to deliver them on the day of the Lord's wrath." King Belshazzar was feasting and drinking wine from the golden vessels of the temple (Daniel 5:3). But when the fingers of a human hand appeared on the wall, his face went pale (verse 6). His wine turned sour, and his banquet was ruined by that uninvited message written on the wall. The things of this world will no more keep out spiritual trouble than a paper wall will stop a bullet.

3. Whatever lasts only for a season cannot make anyone blessed. Everything under the sun lasts only for a season. Therefore nothing under the sun can enrich us with blessedness. Earthly pleasures are like foods that are in season for a short while, then quickly go stale and are wanted no more. "The world is passing away" (1 John 2:17). Worldly delights have wings. They are like a flock of birds in a garden that stay for a little while — but when you move toward them, they fly off and are gone. In the same way, riches make wings for themselves and fly away like an eagle toward the sky (Proverbs 23:5). They are like a shooting star that blazes and then burns out. They are like a castle built of snow sitting under the scorching sun. Augustine said of himself that whenever advancement smiled on him, he was afraid to accept it for fear it would suddenly slip away from him. Outward comforts are, as Plato says, like tennis balls that are knocked from one player to another. Even if we had the longest possible lease on worldly comforts, it would soon expire. Riches and honor are always departing — they pass like a swift current or a ship sailing at full speed. While they are with us, they are already leaving us. They are like a bouquet of flowers that withers while you are still smelling it — like ice that melts in your hand. "The world," says Bernard, "cries out: I am leaving you. It takes its greeting and its farewell at the same time."

4. Whatever brings more trouble than comfort cannot make anyone blessed. Everything under the sun brings more trouble than comfort. Therefore nothing under the sun can truly be called blessed. Just as riches are compared to wind (Hosea 12:1) to show their emptiness, they are also compared to thorns (Matthew 13:22) to show their pain. Thorns are no more certain to tear our clothing

than riches are to tear our hearts. They are thorns in the gathering — they prick with anxiety as we reach for them. And just as they pierce the mind with worry over getting them, they wound the heart with fear of losing them. God ensures that our sweetest wine turns to dregs — and even tastes of a sour cask — so that we will not mistake this world for paradise.

5. Whatever, if we have nothing else, would make us cursed cannot make us blessed. Having only worldly things would make us cursed. Therefore worldly things are far from making us blessed. "Riches are kept for the hurt of their owner" (Ecclesiastes 5:13). To the wicked, riches are fuel for pride. Ezekiel 28:5: "Your heart is lifted up because of your riches." They are also fuel for lust. Jeremiah 5:7: "When I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery." Riches are a snare. 1 Timothy 6:9: "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge men into ruin and destruction." How many have destroyed their souls in the process of building up an estate! A ship can be loaded with so much gold that it sinks. Many a man's gold has sunk him to hell. The rich sinner seals money into his bags, and God seals a curse with it. Habakkuk 2:6: "Woe to him who increases what is not his — how long — and makes himself rich with debts." Augustine observed that Judas sold his salvation for money, and the Pharisees bought their damnation with it. Happiness cannot be dug out of the earth. Those who go to created things for blessedness are looking in the wrong place.

Use 1: Since blessedness is not found in outward things, let us stop looking for it there. To do so is to seek the living among the dead. As the angel told Mary about Christ: "He is not here; He has

risen" (Matthew 28:6). So I can say of blessedness: it is not here — it has risen to a higher realm. How people thirst after the world, as if the pearl of blessedness hung from an earthly crown! "Oh," someone says, "if only I had that kind of wealth, then I would be happy!" "If only I had that comfort, then I could sit down satisfied." God gives the person that comfort and lets them drink every last drop of it. But it disappoints them — it cannot fill the longing of the soul, which still cries out "Give, give" (Proverbs 30:15). It is like a sick man who says, "If only I had that food, I could eat it." When he gets it, his stomach rebels and he can barely taste it. God has placed not only emptiness but bitterness into created things. And it is good for us that there is no perfection here — it forces us to lift our thoughts higher, toward nobler and more satisfying delights. If we could distill the very essence of all created things, we would have to say what Emperor Severus once said — a man who rose from humble origins to rule the greatest empire in the world: "I have passed through every condition, and I have never found full contentment."

Use 2: For those who have little — whose cup overflows not with blessing but with tears — do not be too troubled. Remember, outward comforts cannot make you blessed. You could live rich and die cursed. You could pile up an estate while God piles up wrath. Do not be anxious about things whose absence cannot make you truly miserable, or whose presence cannot make you truly blessed.

Having shown where blessedness does not lie, I will now show where it does. Blessedness consists in enjoying the chief good. 1. It consists in enjoyment — not merely possession, but real enjoyment. A man may possess an estate without truly enjoying it. He

may have ownership but not the pleasure of it — as when he is in a stupor or overwhelmed by depression. But in true blessedness, there must be a genuine experience of what the soul possesses. 2. Blessedness lies in the enjoyment of the chief good. Not every good thing makes a person blessed — it must be the supreme good, and that is God. Psalm 144:15: "Happy are the people whose God is the Lord." God is the resting place of the soul, where the soul truly rests (Psalm 116:7). Only that in which the soul truly finds rest can make it blessed. The circle, as mathematicians observe, is the most perfect of all shapes, because its last point meets the first point where it began. In the same way, when the soul returns to God — from whom it originally sprang — it is completely blessed. Whatever makes a person truly blessed must have six qualities, and these are found nowhere but in God, the chief good.

1. True blessedness requires superiority. Whatever fills us with blessedness must be a good that is greater than ourselves. To enoble a piece of silver, you must combine it with something better than silver — such as gold or pearl. In the same way, whatever ennobles the soul and fills it with blessedness must be something more excellent than the soul itself, and that is God. The world is beneath the soul — it is merely the soul's footstool. It cannot crown the soul with happiness.

2. Another necessary quality is delight. Whatever brings blessedness must have in it a sweetness that utterly captivates the soul — something filled with the essence of joy. Where else can the soul draw those pure pleasures that overwhelm it with wonder and fill it with delight, except in God? The love of God is a honeycomb that drops infinite sweetness and satisfaction into the soul, "un-

speakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8). A single touch of God's favor puts the soul into a holy rapture, so that it cries out: "It is good to be here."

3. The third quality of blessedness is abundance. Whatever makes someone blessed must not be scarce — it is a full draft that quenches the soul's thirst. And where is abundance found except in God? Psalm 36:8: "You give them drink from the river of Your delights" — not drops, but rivers. The soul bathes itself and lies soaking in the water of life. The river of paradise overflows and pours its streams into the souls of the blessed.

4. True blessedness requires variety. Abundance without variety grows tedious. In God there is all fullness (Colossians 1:19). What could the soul desire that is not found in the chief good? God is good, and all good things are found in Him. He is a sun, a shield, a portion, a fountain, a rock of strength, a horn of salvation. In God every perfection is gathered together, and fresh beauties and delights spring from Him at every moment.

5. Blessedness requires perfection. The joy must be perfect; the glory must be perfect. Hebrews 12:23: "The spirits of the righteous made perfect." Goodness requires completeness. The smallest defect destroys the nature of blessedness, just as the slightest trace of disease disturbs the body's health.

6. True blessedness must have eternity stamped upon it. Blessedness is fixed — it admits no change or end. God says of every one of His children: "I have blessed him, and he shall be blessed." Just as the sunshine of blessedness has no clouds, so it also has no sunset. John 10:28: "And I give eternal life to them." 1 Thessalonians 4:17: "And so we will always be with the Lord."

Eternity is the highest link in the chain of blessedness. This diamond of blessedness, then, is found only in the Rock of Ages. "Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord."

Use 1: Since there is a blessedness held in reserve, settle this as an article of your faith. We live in a time when many have slid into atheism. They have passed through one opinion after another, and from being professing Christians they have become practical hedonists. They have absorbed so much of the poison of error that they are completely intoxicated, have fallen asleep spiritually, and have begun to dream that there is no such thing as a state of blessedness after this life. This opinion has become more authoritative to them than the Bible itself. When people develop spiritual vertigo, it is a dangerous sign that they are dying. It is a grave thing to waver about foundational truths — like Pythagoras, who doubted whether God even existed. Some now doubt whether there is any blessedness at all. To begin doubting first principles is the next step toward denying them entirely. Let it be a settled conviction of every true Christian: there is a blessedness held in reserve. "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9).

Use 2: Turn this truth over often in your mind. Many truths float around in the mind without ever sinking into the heart — and those do us no good. Chew on it slowly. Let a Christian think seriously: there is a blessedness within reach, and I am capable of enjoying it — if I do not set up barriers and block my own path to happiness. Even though within I see nothing but guilt, and around me I see nothing but trouble — there is a blessedness available, and it is available for me, through the proper use of means.

Seriously meditating on this truth is a powerful argument to move a sinner to break from sin through repentance and press hard until he finds the golden treasure of blessedness. I say it would be the death blow of sin. How eagerly a man would fight against himself through self-denial, and press toward heaven through prayer, if he were truly persuaded he could arrive at blessedness! Is there really a crown of blessedness about to be placed on my head? A crown hung with the jewels of honor, delight, and magnificence — a crown held out by God Himself — and shall I risk it for sin? Can the pleasure of sin ever compensate for the loss of blessedness? What more powerful motive to repentance could there be than this: sin will rob me of the blessing! If a man knew for certain that a king would transfer all his royal wealth to him after a certain number of years, would he offend that king and cause him to revoke his will? Blessedness is promised to all who live godly lives. ¹ John 2:25: "This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life." We are not excluded — we may enter as children and receive our share. Shall we then live in sin, provoke God, and forfeit this blessedness? What madness this is! The Apostle was right to call them "foolish and harmful desires" (1 Timothy 6:9), because every sinful desire does its best to cut off the inheritance of mercy and block the path to happiness. Every sin is like the flaming sword that keeps the sinner out of the heavenly paradise.

Use 3: Let us live in such a way that shows others we genuinely believe in a blessedness to come. We do this by seeking to know God — for the light of blessedness shines only from His face. It is our union with God, the chief good, that makes us blessed. Let us never rest until we can say: "This God is our God forever and ever"

(Psalm 48:14). Most people think that because God has blessed them with property, they are therefore blessed. But God often gives these things in anger. He grants in anger what He withholds in favor. He loads His enemies with gold and silver. Plutarch tells the story of Tarpeia, a vestal virgin who made a deal with the enemy to betray the Capitol of Rome to them, on condition that she receive the golden bracelets on their left arms. When they entered the Capitol, they threw not only their golden bracelets but also their shields upon her — and she was crushed to death under the weight. God often lets people have the golden bracelets — and the weight of them sinks those people into hell. Let us set our hearts on things above. Let us fix our eyes and unite our hearts to God the supreme good. This is what it means to pursue blessedness with all you have.

2. Let us also declare to the world that we believe in a blessedness to come by living blessed lives. Walk as heirs of blessedness are meant to walk. A crown of blessedness and a life of sin will never fit together. Many people say they are headed for heaven but are steering a completely opposite course. The devil is their pilot and they are sailing toward hell — like someone who says he is sailing east but is heading due west. The drunkard will tell you he hopes for blessedness, but he is sailing another way. You must go to heaven weeping over sin, not reeling from drink. The immoral person talks of blessedness, but he has fallen into that deep pit (Proverbs 23:27) where he is far more likely to find hell than heaven. An animal might sooner be made into an angel than an unrepentant immoral person be allowed to enter God's paradise. The greedy person — of whom it may be said he is "a worm and not a man" (Psalm 22:6), always crawling along the ground — still

wants to lay claim to blessedness. But can earth ascend? Shall a clump of clay be made into a bright star in the sky of glory? Know this: those who congratulate themselves in their sins will never be blessed. For God says (Deuteronomy 29:19): if a sinner blesses himself, saying "I will have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart" — adding drunkenness to thirst — the Lord will not forgive him. Rather, His anger and jealousy will burn against that man, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. A person can no more extract blessedness from sin than suck health from poison. Let us lead blessed lives and so make it plain that we are seeking a better country (Hebrews 11:14).

Use 4: To you who have good hope through grace that you have a claim to blessedness — let me say with the Levites to the people (Nehemiah 9:5): "Stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever." What infinite reason you have to be grateful that the lot of free grace has fallen upon you! Though you had forfeited everything, God has prepared a haven of happiness and is carrying you there on the sea of Christ's blood, with the wind of His Spirit filling your sails. You are in a better condition through Christ than you were when you wore the robes of innocence. God has lifted you a step higher by your fall. How many has God passed over in choosing to look upon you? Millions will lie forever under the bitter bowls of God's curses, while He will bring you into His banqueting hall, pour out cups of wine, and feast you eternally with the delights of heaven. Adore free grace. Rejoice in God's love. Spend yourself fully for the Lord. Offer yourself to Him in surrender, and pour yourself out for Him in gratitude. Never think you can do too much for the God who will shortly bring you safely to shore on the land of promise.

CHAPTER 3



Showing that the godly are in some sense already blessed.

I come now to the second principle: the godly are in some sense already blessed. The saints are blessed not only when they have arrived at heaven, but while they are still on the journey. They are blessed before they are crowned. To human eyes this sounds like a contradiction — reproached, despised, and yet blessed! Someone looking at God's people through worldly eyes, seeing how they suffer and how, like the boat in the Gospels that was covered by waves (Matthew 8:24), they appear to be overwhelmed, would conclude they were anything but blessed. Paul lists his sufferings (2 Corinthians 11:24-26): "Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked" — and so on. And those great Christians of the early church, "of whom the world was not worthy," experienced cruel mockings and whippings. They were sawed in two; they were killed with the sword (Hebrews 11:36-37). Were all these people blessed during the time of their sufferings? A worldly person would say: "If this is what it means to be blessed, God spare me from it."

Yet however the senses and reason might vote, our Savior Christ declares the godly person blessed — even if mourning, even if martyred, still blessed. Job on the ash heap was still blessed Job. The saints are blessed even when they are cursed. Shimei cursed David (2 Samuel 16:5), yet even while David was being cursed, he was still blessed David. The saints, though bruised, are still blessed. Not merely that they will be blessed, but that they are blessed now: Psalm 119:1, "Blessed are the blameless"; Psalm 3:8, "Your blessing is upon Your people."

Question: In what sense are the saints already blessed?

Answer 1: They are blessed in that they have been enriched with heavenly blessings (Ephesians 1:3). They are partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4) — not by being absorbed into God's essence, but by being transformed into His likeness. This is blessedness begun. Just as a newborn baby is said to have life in it as fully as a grown adult, so the saints who share in the divine nature have blessedness in an initial form, even though they have not yet arrived at its fullness. Believers have the seed of God in them (1 John 3:9), and this is a seed of blessedness. The flower of glory grows from the seed of grace. Grace and glory are not different in kind — only in degree. One is the root, the other the fruit. Grace is glory in the early dawn; glory is grace at full noon. The saints have the Spirit of God dwelling in them (2 Timothy 1:14): "The Holy Spirit who dwells in us." How can the blessed Spirit live in a person and that person not be blessed? A godly person's heart is a garden planted with the finest fruit, and God Himself walks through that garden — how could such a person not be blessed?

2. The saints are already blessed because their sins are not counted against them (Psalm 32:2). God's not counting sin against a person means He treats that sin as though it never happened. It is as if the person had never sinned at all. The debt book has been cancelled in Christ's blood. God's not counting sin means He will never demand payment of the debt. And if it were ever demanded, it would be hidden from sight. Jeremiah 50:20: "In those days the iniquity of Israel will be searched for, but there will be none; and the sins of Judah will be searched for, but they will not be found." The person whose sin is not counted against him is truly blessed — because if sin is not counted, the curse is removed. And if the curse is removed, he must be blessed.

3. The saints are already blessed because they are in covenant with God. This becomes clear when two Scriptures are placed together: Jeremiah 31:33, "I will be their God"; and Psalm 144:15, "Happy are the people whose God is the Lord." Having the Lord as our God is the crowning blessing. It is impossible that God should be our God and we not be blessed. This sweet promise — "I will be your God" — implies:

1. Ownership — that all that belongs to God shall be ours: His love ours, His Spirit ours, His mercy ours.

2. It implies all the closest relationships. First, the relationship of a Father: 2 Corinthians 6:18, "I will be a Father to you." The sons of a prince are considered happy — how much more blessed are the saints, who belong to the royal family of God? Second, it implies the relationship of a husband: Isaiah 54:5, "Your Maker is your husband." The bride, betrothed to her husband, shares in all he has. The saints, betrothed to Christ by faith, are blessed — even though the full wedding celebration is reserved for heaven. Third,

it implies friendship: those in covenant with God are favorites of heaven. "Abraham My friend" (Isaiah 41:8). It is considered a great honor for a subject to enjoy the favor of his king, even if he lives away from the royal court. How much greater must be the happiness of those who are God's own favorites?

4. The saints are already blessed because heaven is held in reserve for them. Consider the contrast: the one who has hell in reserve is said to be already condemned. John 3:18: "He who does not believe has been judged already." In the same way, the one who has heaven in reserve can be said to be already blessed. A man who holds the legal right to a house once a short lease expires already looks on it as his own, saying: "That house is mine." In the same way, a believer holds the right to heaven once the short lease of this life expires. Right now he can say: "Christ is mine, and glory is mine." He has a legal title to heaven — and the person with a title to show is a blessed person. Better still, faith turns what is held in reserve into a present possession.

5. The saints are already blessed because they enjoy the firstfruits of blessedness here and now. Scripture speaks of the deposit of the Spirit and the seal (2 Corinthians 1:22), and the firstfruits (Romans 8:23). Heaven has already begun in the believer. Romans 14:17: "The kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." This kingdom is within the believer's heart (Luke 17:21). God's people have a foretaste of blessedness in this life. Just as Israel tasted a cluster of grapes before they ever took possession of Canaan, so God's children receive those quiet comforts of the Spirit, those smiles of Christ's face, those kisses of His presence, those gifts of love — all of which are like clusters of grapes from the promised land. Often the Comforter is poured into the soul

through a means of grace, and in that moment the soul stands in the suburbs of the heavenly Jerusalem. A Christian sees heaven by faith and tastes it through joy — and what is that but blessedness?

6. The saints can be said to be blessed in this life because everything is working to make them blessed. Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God." We say of a person for whom everything is turning out well: "You are a fortunate person." The saints are truly fortunate in this way, because everything is working toward their good. Prosperity does them good; adversity does them good. Even their sins work for their good in the end. Every stumble makes them more watchful; their ailments become their medicines. Are they not blessed people, for whom every wind blows them into the right harbor?

7. A saint can be said to be blessed because part of him is already blessed. He is blessed in his Head — Christ his Head is in glory. Christ and believers form one body together, and their Head has already entered heaven.

Use 1, Branch 1: See the difference between a wicked person and a godly person. No matter how many comforts a wicked person has, he is still cursed. No matter how many hardships a godly person faces, he is still blessed. A wicked person may have God's candle shining on him (Job 29:3), his path perfectly smooth with no obstacles in his way, and every venture succeeding — and yet a curse still hangs over him. You can read the sinner's inventory in Deuteronomy 28:16-18. He is no more filled with sin than he is filled with a curse. Though he may congratulate himself in his wickedness, he is heir to God's curse. All the curses of the Bible are

his portion — and at the hour of death, that portion is certain to be paid out. But a godly person, in the midst of all his troubles, is blessed. He may be under the cross, but he is not under a curse.

Branch 2: This shows the privilege of the believer. He not only will be blessed — he is blessed now. Blessedness has already begun in him. Psalm 115:15: "You are blessed of the Lord." No matter how sorrowful a righteous person's condition may be, it is still a blessed condition. He is blessed in affliction: Psalm 94:12, "Blessed is the man whom You chasten." Blessed in poverty: James 2:5, "Poor in the world's eyes, but rich in faith." Blessed in disgrace: 1 Peter 4:14, "The Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." This truth is a restorative for the fainting Christian — he is blessed in life and in death, and Satan cannot steal the blessing from him.

Branch 3: How this truth should do away with grumbling and gloom in God's child. Will you complain and be miserable when you are blessed? Esau wept because he had lost the blessing (Genesis 27:38): "Bless me — me also, O my father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. But should a child of God sink into deep despair when he already has the blessing? Adam sinned in the middle of paradise. How wrong it is to be blessed and yet to grumble!

Branch 4: What an encouragement this gives to godliness! We all want to be blessed — so let us embrace true religion. Psalm 112:1: "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord." But you may say: "This way of life is spoken against everywhere." It doesn't matter — because this is the path to the blessing. Imagine a wealthy man who adopts someone as his heir, and others mock that person — he doesn't care, as long as he is heir to the estate. In the same way,

what does it matter if others mock you for your faith, as long as it secures a blessing for you? The day you become truly godly is the day you become truly blessed.

CHAPTER 4



Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Having discussed the general concept of blessedness, I now turn to the subjects of this blessedness — those our Savior describes as the poor in spirit, the mourners, and so on. But before I take up each of these, I will briefly introduce and frame this sermon of the Beatitudes.

1. Notice the divine wisdom in this sermon, which goes beyond all human philosophy. Philosophers teach that one opposite drives out another. But here, one opposite produces another. Poverty ordinarily drives out wealth — but here, poverty produces wealth. How rich are those who have a kingdom? Mourning ordinarily drives out joy — but here, mourning produces joy. "They shall be comforted." Water ordinarily quenches fire — but the water of tears kindles the flame of joy. Persecution ordinarily destroys happiness — but here it creates happiness. "Blessed are those who are persecuted." These are the sacred paradoxes of our Savior's sermon.

2. Notice how Christ's teaching and the opinion of worldly people are worlds apart. Worldly people think the rich are blessed. The world would call a person blessed who had the wish of Midas

— that everything he touched would turn to gold. But Christ says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The world thinks those at the top are blessed. Christ declares blessed those who are in the valley. Christ's way of counting and the world's way of counting do not agree.

3. Notice the nature of true religion: poverty of spirit leads the way, and persecution brings up the rear. "Every true saint," said Luther, "is heir to the cross!" Some people want to appear religious, displaying Christ's colors through a glowing profession of faith — but to be poor in spirit and persecuted is too bitter a pill for them to swallow. They want to wear Christ's jewels but avoid His cross. These people are strangers to true religion.

4. Notice the sure connection between grace and its reward. Those who are poor in spirit will have the kingdom of God. They are as certain to reach heaven as if they were already there. Our Savior draws people toward true religion by pairing commands with promises and tying duty to reward. In the body, veins carry blood and arteries carry oxygen. In the same way, one part of each of these verses carries duty, and the other part carries reward. Our Lord Christ, having set out the marks of a true Christian — poor in spirit, pure in heart, and so on — paints these heavenly qualities in the beautiful colors of blessedness and places the magnificent crown of reward upon them. By this beauty He invites the heart to love what is most lovely.

5. Notice the connected chain of graces: poor in spirit, meek, merciful, and so on. Where one grace is present, all are present. Just as philosophers say the moral virtues are linked together, we can say the same of the graces of the Spirit — they are chained together. Whoever is poor in spirit is also a mourner; whoever

mourns is also meek; whoever is meek is also merciful; and so on. The Spirit of God plants in the heart a disposition toward all the graces together. The new creation has all its parts and features, just as the human body contains all its elements in proper mixture. The graces of the Spirit are like a strand of pearls strung together on the thread of true religion, adorning Christ's bride. I point this out to show the difference between a hypocrite and a genuine child of God. The hypocrite flatters himself with a claim to grace, yet he does not have all the graces. He lacks poverty of spirit and purity of heart. But a child of God has all the graces in his heart — at least in seed form, even if not in full measure. With these things in view, I come now to examine those specific qualities of soul to which Christ attaches blessedness. The first is poverty of spirit.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Chrysostom and Theophylact believed this was the first sermon Christ ever preached, which means it deserves our best attention. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Our Lord Christ, setting out to build a high and magnificent structure of blessedness, lays the foundation low — in poverty of spirit. But not all poverty is blessed. I will use four distinctions to clarify this.

1. I distinguish between being poor in possessions and being poor in spirit. Some are what we might call the devil's poor — poor and wicked, their conscience just as torn as their clothes. Some people's poverty is their own doing — brought on by carelessness or excess. These may be poor in possessions but not poor in spirit.

2. I distinguish between being spiritually poor and being poor in spirit. Someone without grace is spiritually poor, but that does not make him poor in spirit — he has no awareness of his own

spiritual poverty. Revelation 3:17: "You do not know that you are poor." The worst kind of poverty is having no sense of one's poverty.

3. I distinguish between being small-spirited and being poor in spirit. Small-spirited people are those with petty, base characters who live beneath their dignity. 1. As human beings, they are like misers who own large estates yet can barely bring themselves to provide for their own basic needs. They live miserably and almost begrudge having to spend anything on the necessities of life. Solomon calls this an evil under the sun. Ecclesiastes 6:2: "There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches were hoarded by their owner to his hurt." God gives a man wealth so that he lacks nothing his soul desires, yet God does not give him the ability to enjoy it. True religion makes no one a miser. It teaches wisdom with money, but not meanness. 2. Others act beneath their dignity as Christians by sinfully compromising and surrendering themselves to whatever others demand. These are people with no backbone — they will take any shape required of them. They will sell the jewel of a good conscience for a piece of silver. They will adopt the religion of whoever holds power. They will dance to the devil's tune if their superior commands it. These are small-spirited, but they are not poor in spirit.

4. I distinguish between poverty of spirit in the biblical sense and poverty in the Roman Catholic sense. The Roman Catholics give a wrong interpretation of this text. By "poor in spirit" they understand those who renounce their property and take a vow of voluntary poverty, withdrawing into monasteries to live in seclusion. But Christ never meant any such thing. He does not pronounce

blessed those who make themselves materially poor by abandoning their property and their occupations — but those who are poor in spirit in the biblical sense.

So then, what do we mean by "poor in spirit"? The Greek word for poor is not limited to those who live on charity or have nothing left. In a broader sense, it describes those who are destitute of both inward and outward resources. To be poor in spirit means to be brought to a deep awareness of one's sins, to see no goodness in oneself, to abandon all hope in oneself, and to appeal entirely to the mercy of God in Christ. Poverty of spirit is a kind of self-emptying. Calvin expressed it this way: "The poor in spirit are those who see nothing in themselves and flee to mercy as their refuge." The tax collector in Luke 18:13 was just such a person: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." Paul had this same disposition (Philippians 3:9): "That I may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own." These are the poor who are invited as guests to wisdom's feast (Proverbs 9:3-4). Several questions naturally arise at this point.

1. Why does Christ begin with poverty of spirit? Question 1: Why is this placed first? Christ places it first to show that poverty of spirit is the very foundation and root of all the other graces that follow. You might as well expect fruit without a root as expect the other graces without this one. Until a person is poor in spirit, he cannot mourn. Poverty of spirit is like the heat under a distilling vessel — it draws the water of tears from the eyes. When a person sees his own faults and failures, and looks on himself as lost, he then mourns and reaches out for Christ. Springs run in the valleys (Psalm 104:10). When the heart becomes a valley — lowered by poverty of spirit — the springs of holy mourning begin to flow.

Until a person is poor in spirit, he cannot hunger and thirst for righteousness. He must first feel his need before he can be hungry. This is why Christ begins with poverty of spirit: it opens the door to everything else.

Question 2: What is the difference between poverty of spirit and humility? Answer: These two are so similar that they are often treated as the same thing. Chrysostom takes poverty of spirit to mean humility. Yet I think there is a real difference between them — the difference between a cause and its effect. Tertullian says none are poor in spirit except the humble, which seems to make humility the cause of poverty of spirit. I tend to think it is the other way around: poverty of spirit is the cause of humility. When a person sees his need for Christ and realizes he is living on the charity of free grace, it humbles him. The person who is aware of his own emptiness and poverty bows his head in humility, like a violet. Humility is the sweet fruit that grows from the root of poverty of spirit.

Question 3: What is the difference between poverty of spirit and self-denial? Answer: In some ways they are alike; in other ways they differ. They are alike in this: the person who is poor in spirit is also a thorough self-denier. He gives up any opinion of his own worth and acknowledges his complete dependence on Christ and free grace. But they differ in this: the self-denier gives up the world for Christ, while the person who is poor in spirit gives up himself for Christ — that is, his own righteousness. The poor in spirit sees himself as nothing without Christ; the self-denier will leave himself with nothing for Christ's sake. Having explained what poverty of spirit is, the words open up this truth for us.

Doctrine: Christians must be poor in spirit. Or stated another way: poverty of spirit is the jewel every Christian must wear. Just as the most remarkable of created things — light — came from nothing, so when a person sees himself as nothing, God makes something beautiful out of that nothing. God's usual way is to first make a person poor in spirit, and then fill him with the graces of the Spirit. It is like taking apart a watch — first you separate all the pieces, then you carefully set all the wheels and pins back in their proper place. God first takes a person completely apart, shows him his ruined condition, and then puts him back together rightly.

The reasons are these:

1. Until we are poor in spirit, we are not ready to receive grace. Someone who is swollen with a high opinion of his own worth and self-sufficiency has no room for Christ — he is already full. What is inside blocks out what is being offered from outside. If the hand is full of pebbles, it cannot receive gold. A glass must first be emptied before wine can be poured into it. God first empties a person of himself before pouring in the precious wine of His grace. Christ's commission covers only the poor in spirit. Isaiah 61:1: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me... He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted" — that is, those who are broken by a sense of their own unworthiness.

2. Until we are poor in spirit, Christ is never truly precious to us. Before we see our own need, we cannot see Christ's worth. Poverty of spirit is the salt and seasoning — the sauce that makes Christ taste sweet to the soul. Mercy is most welcome to the poor in spirit. The person who sees himself clothed in filthy rags (Zechariah 3:4-5) — what would he give for a change of clothing, for the righteousness of Christ? What would he give to have the

bright crown of salvation placed on his head? When a person sees himself nearly mortally wounded, how precious will the healing balm of Christ's blood be to him? When he sees himself deep in debt to God — so deep he cannot even calculate the total — how desperately he will long for someone to stand as his surety! The pearl of great price is only precious to the poor in spirit. The person who is starving and desperate for bread will have it at any price. He will pawn his coat; he must have bread or he is finished. In the same way, to the person who is poor in spirit — who sees his desperate need for Christ — how precious is a Savior! Christ is truly Christ to him, and grace is truly grace. He will do anything for the bread of life. This is why God works to bring the soul to this condition: to raise the value of Christ in the market of the soul, and to make the Lord Jesus truly precious.

3. Until we are poor in spirit, we cannot enter heaven. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poverty of spirit tunes and prepares us for heaven. By nature, a person is puffed up with self-confidence, and the gate of heaven is so narrow that he cannot pass through. Poverty of spirit cuts down the soul's excess, trimming away the pride and self-reliance, so that he becomes fit to enter through the narrow gate. A thick rope cannot pass through the eye of a needle. But unravel it into individual threads, and it can. Poverty of spirit unravels the pride of a person's heart, making him small in his own eyes — and then "an entrance will be abundantly supplied" to him into the eternal kingdom (2 Peter 1:11). We must pass through the gate of poverty of spirit on the way to the temple of glory.

Use 1: This shows where a Christian's true wealth lies — in poverty of spirit. Some think that if they can fill their accounts with gold, they are wealthy. But the truly wealthy are those who are

poor in spirit, for they are rich in poverty. This poverty gives them title to a kingdom. How poor are those who think themselves rich! How rich are those who see themselves as poor! I call it the jewel of poverty. There are paradoxes in the Christian life that the world cannot grasp: becoming a fool in order to become wise (1 Corinthians 3:18), saving your life by losing it (Matthew 16:25), and becoming rich by being poor. Reason laughs at all this. But "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom." This poverty is worth striving for more than any earthly riches. Beneath these rags lies cloth of gold; from this carcass comes honey.

Use 2: If the poor in spirit are blessed, then by the opposite principle, the proud in spirit are cursed (Proverbs 16:5). There is a kind of person who commits idolatry with himself — and there is no idol like the self. Such people admire their own abilities, their morality, their self-righteousness, and on this foundation they build their hope of salvation. Many are too good, in their own estimation, to go to heaven. They think they have enough resources of their own and are too proud to live on the charity of grace or to be indebted to Christ. The devil has blown these people up like balloons with pride, and they are swollen with self-conceit. But it is like the swelling of a person with dropsy — the bigness is the disease. This was the case with that proud, self-righteous man in Luke 18:11. "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: God, I thank You that I am not like other people — swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." Here was a man hoisting the full sail of pride. But the tax collector, who was poor in spirit, stood far off and would not even lift his eyes toward heaven. He beat his breast and said: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." This man carried

away the prize. "I tell you," says Christ, "this man went to his house justified rather than the other." Paul before his conversion thought he was in fine standing: "As to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Philippians 3:6). He intended to build a tower of his own righteousness tall enough to reach heaven. But God showed him there was a crack in the foundation, and then Paul ran to the Rock of Ages (Philippians 3:9): "That I may be found in Him." There is no more dangerous cliff than self-righteousness. This was the condition of Laodicea (Revelation 3:17): "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor." She thought she lacked nothing when in truth she had nothing. How many does this destroy! We see ships that escape the rocks only to be wrecked on the sandbars. In the same way, some escape the rocks of open sin only to be wrecked on the sandbars of self-righteousness. And how hard it is to convince such people of their danger! They will not accept that they cannot be saved by their own tattered rags of merit. They cannot be persuaded that their case is as bad as others make it out to be. Christ tells them they are blind, but they are like Seneca's servant girl who had been blind from birth yet refused to believe it. She said: "The house is dark, not I." Christ tells them they are naked and offers His white robes to cover them, but they think otherwise. And because they are blind, they cannot see that they are naked. How many have been lost by trying to save themselves! Oh, let this drive the proud sinner out of himself. A person never truly comes to himself until he comes out of himself — and no one can come out of himself until Christ first comes in.

Use 3: Since poverty of spirit is so necessary, how can I know whether I have it? Answer: By its blessed effects, which are these:

1. The person who is poor in spirit is weaned from self-reliance (Psalm 131:2). "My soul is like a weaned child." It is a hard thing to be weaned from oneself. A vine grabs hold of whatever is nearby to support itself. There is always some branch or other that a person wants to grab onto for support. How difficult it is to be pulled entirely away from oneself! But the poor in spirit are separated from self-trust. They see that without Christ they are on the road to hell. "My soul is like a weaned child."

2. The person who is poor in spirit is someone who holds Christ in highest admiration. He has a towering view of Christ. He sees himself naked and flies to Christ, that wrapped in His clothing he may receive the blessing. He sees himself wounded, and as a wounded deer runs to water, so he thirsts for Christ's blood — the water of life. "Lord," he says, "give me Christ or I die." His conscience has turned into a fiery serpent and has stung him — now he would give the whole world for the bronze serpent to look upon. He sees himself in a state of death and knows how precious even one leaf from the tree of life would be — a tree that is both food and medicine. The poor in spirit sees all his wealth as lying in Christ — wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and everything else. In every need he runs to this storehouse. He is captivated by the infinite fullness that is in Christ. They say of the holy oil at Rheims that though it is constantly being used, it never runs out. Christ's blood is like that — it can never be exhausted. The person who is poor in spirit returns again and again to this fountain. He places the highest value on Christ. He hides himself in Christ's

wounds; he bathes in His blood; he wraps himself in His robe. He sees spiritual famine at home, but he makes his way to Christ and says: "Show me the Lord, and that is enough."

3. The person who is poor in spirit is always speaking of his spiritual needs. Just as a poor person is always describing his wants — how he has nothing to help himself, how he is barely surviving — so the person who is poor in spirit is always lamenting what he lacks. "I lack a broken heart; I lack a grateful heart." He sees himself as the most needy creature alive. Though he would not deny the work of grace in him — to do so would be bearing false witness against the Spirit — he still mourns that he has no more grace. This is the difference between a hypocrite and a child of God: the hypocrite is always telling you what he has; a child of God complains of what he lacks. One is glad he is so good; the other grieves that he is so bad. The poor in spirit goes from one means of grace to another seeking supply for his needs — he longs to have his spiritual stock increased. Test yourself by this: while others complain that they lack children or wealth, do you complain that you lack grace? This is a good sign. "There is one who pretends to be poor, but has great wealth" (Proverbs 13:7). Some beggars have died rich. In the same way, the poor in spirit — who have spent their lives at the gate of mercy and lived on the charity of free grace — have died rich in faith, as heirs to a kingdom.

4. The person who is poor in spirit is humble in heart. Wealthy people are commonly proud and dismissive, but the poor are submissive. The poor in spirit lower themselves in the dust, aware of their own unworthiness: "I abhor myself, and I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). The person who is poor in spirit notices the strengths of others and his own weaknesses. He denies not only his

sins but also his accomplishments in duty. The more grace he has, the more humble he becomes — because now he sees himself as an even greater debtor to God. When he performs any act of duty, he acknowledges it is Christ's strength more than his own (Philippians 4:13). Just as a ship reaches its destination more through the wind than through the effort of the sail, so when a Christian makes genuine progress, it is more through the wind of God's Spirit than the sail of his own effort. The person who is poor in spirit, even when acting most like a true saint, still confesses himself the chief of sinners. He blushes more at the deficiencies of his graces than others blush at the excess of their sins. He hardly dares claim that he has prayed or wept. He lives — yet not he, but Christ lives in him (Galatians 2:20). He labors — yet not he, but the grace of God (1 Corinthians 15:10).

5. The person who is poor in spirit is constant in prayer. He sees how far short he falls of the standard of holiness, so he begs for more grace: "Lord, more faith, more likeness to Christ." A poor person is always begging. You can recognize one who is poor in spirit by this — he is always begging for spiritual provision. He knocks at heaven's gate; he sends up sighs; he pours out tears. He will not leave the gate until he has received his portion. God loves a reverent boldness in prayer, and such a person will never be turned away.

6. The person who is poor in spirit is willing to accept Christ on Christ's own terms. The proud sinner tries to negotiate with Christ — he wants Christ and his pleasures, Christ and his greed. But the person who is poor in spirit sees himself as lost without Christ and is willing to have Him on His own terms — as King as well as Savior. Philippians 3:8: "Jesus my Lord." A fortress that has been

under siege for a long time and is about to fall will surrender on any terms to save the lives of those inside. In the same way, the heart that has long been a stronghold for the devil — holding out in resistance against Christ — when God finally brings it to poverty of spirit and it sees it is lost without Christ, will readily agree to whatever terms God proposes. Acts 9:6: "Lord, what do You want me to do?" The person who is poor in spirit will do anything to have Christ. He will put his cherished sin to death. He will, like Peter, throw himself into the water to get to Christ.

7. The person who is poor in spirit is a celebrator of free grace. No one magnifies mercy more than the poor in spirit, because the poor are very grateful. When Paul had experienced mercy, how gratefully he worships free grace! 1 Timothy 1:14: "The grace of our Lord was more than abundant." The Greek is even stronger — it was overflowing, beyond measure. He places the crown of his salvation on the head of free grace. Like a man who has been condemned and receives a pardon, how he proclaims the goodness and generosity of his king! Paul in the same way puts free grace on full display in all its richness. He weaves free grace into every one of his letters. Just as a vessel that has been perfumed with a fragrance makes the wine stored in it taste of that fragrance, so Paul — a vessel saturated with mercy — makes all his letters taste of the perfume of free grace. Those who are poor in spirit bless God for the smallest crumb that falls from the table of free grace.

Use 4: Labor to be poor in spirit. Christ begins here, and we must begin here if we are ever to be saved. Poverty of spirit is the foundation stone on which God builds the superstructure of glory. There are four things that should persuade Christians to pursue poverty of spirit. 1. This poverty is your wealth. You may have the

world's riches and still be spiritually poor. But if you have this poverty, you cannot fail to be rich. Poverty of spirit gives you title to all of Christ's riches. 2. This poverty is your nobility. God regards you as a person of honor. The one who is lowly in his own eyes is precious in God's eyes. The way to rise is to fall. God considers the valley the highest place. 3. Poverty of spirit sweetly settles the soul. When a person is drawn off himself to rest on Christ, what a blessed calm fills the heart! "I am poor, but my God will supply all my needs" (Philippians 4:19). "I am unworthy, but Christ is worthy. I am empty; Christ is infinite." "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (Psalm 61:2). A person is safe on a rock. When the soul leaves itself and rests on the Rock, Christ, it is firmly settled on its foundation. 4. Poverty of spirit opens the road to blessedness. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Are you poor in spirit? Then you are blessed — how wonderful it is that you were ever born! If you ask where this blessedness appears — read the next words: "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

CHAPTER 5



Showing that the poor in spirit are enriched with a kingdom.
Matthew 5:3: "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Here is the highest honor for the saints — they will be elevated to a kingdom. Some, longing for earthly greatness, speak of a temporal reign here on earth. But then God's church on earth would not be a church militant but a church triumphant. The saints will reign in a truly glorious way: theirs is the kingdom of heaven. A kingdom is considered the highest summit of all earthly greatness, and this honor belongs to all the saints. By the kingdom of heaven is meant that state of glory in which the saints will reign with God and the angels forever, with sin, hell, and death fully conquered. I will show first in what ways the saints in heaven are like kings.

In what ways the glorified saints can be compared to kings.

Kings have their royal symbols — the marks of royalty and majesty.

Kings have their crowns. After death, the saints likewise have their royal crown (Revelation 2:10): "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." Believers are not only pardoned but crowned. The crown is a mark of honor — it does not fit just anyone; it belongs only to kings and persons of great renown. The

crown the poor in spirit will wear in heaven is a crown of true honor. God Himself installs them in that honor and places the royal crown on their head. This crown is divinely radiant and glorious, surpassing all others.

It is more pure. Other crowns, though made of fine gold, are still mixed — they come with their troubles. A crown of gold is inseparable from thorns. It carries so many troubles and burdens that it is likely to give the head beneath it headaches. Cyrus said that if people knew what cares he bore under the imperial crown, they would not stoop to pick it up. But the saints' crown is made without crosses — it is free from the anxiety of keeping it or the fear of losing it. This crown, like David's harp, drives away every spirit of sorrow and unrest. There can be no more grief in heaven than there is joy in hell.

This crown of glory does not attract envy. David's own son envied him and tried to take his crown. An earthly crown is often the target of envy and ambition. But the crown the saints will wear is free from envy. One saint will not envy another, because all are crowned. And though one crown may be larger than another, every person will receive a crown exactly as large as he is able to carry.

This is a crown that will never fade. Other crowns quickly wear out and fall to dust (Proverbs 27:24): "A crown is not for all generations." Henry VI wore the crowns of two kingdoms — France and England. The first was lost through the scheming of his nobles; the second was twice pulled from his head. A crown has many heirs and successors. The crown is a fading thing — death is a worm that eats away at it. But the crown of glory does not fade (1 Peter 5:4). It is not like a rose that loses its color and freshness. This crown can-

not wither. Like the flower called *Semper vivens* — ever-living — it stays always fresh and radiant. Eternity is the chief jewel in the saints' crown.

Kings have their robes — garments in which kings are arrayed. The king of Israel and the king of Judah sat clothed in their robes (2 Chronicles 18:9). The robe was of scarlet or velvet lined with white fur — sometimes purple, sometimes a brilliant blue. In the same way, the saints will have their robes (Revelation 7:9): "I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes, clothed in white robes." The saints' robes signify their glory and radiance, and the white robes signify their purity — they carry no sin to stain or soil their robes. In these robes they will shine like the angels.

Kings have their scepters as symbols of rule and greatness. King Ahasuerus extended the golden scepter to Esther (Esther 5:2). The saints in glory have their scepters and palm branches in their hands (Revelation 7). It was the custom of great conquerors to carry palm branches as a sign of victory. In the same way, the saints carry palms — a symbol of their victory and triumph over sin and hell (Revelation 12:11): "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb."

Kings have their thrones. When Caesar returned from conquering his enemies, a chair of ivory was set for him. In the same way, the saints in heaven will have a throne of glory (Revelation 3:21). It will be a high throne, elevated above all the kings and princes of the earth — "far above all heavens" (Ephesians 4:10). There is the atmospheric heaven — the space from earth to the sphere of the moon; the starry heaven, where the stars and higher planets are; and the highest heaven, called the third heaven (2 Corinthians

12:2). In this glorious, sublime place the throne of the saints will be set. It is also a secure throne. Other thrones stand on slippery ground (Psalm 73:18), but the saints' throne is sure (Revelation 3:21): "He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne." You people of God — think on this. Though you may now be brought before courts of judgment, you will soon sit upon the throne.

Showing in what ways the kingdom of heaven surpasses all other kingdoms.

Having shown in what ways the saints in glory are like kings, let us now see in what ways the kingdom of heaven surpasses all other kingdoms.

It surpasses in its builder. Other kingdoms have men as their builders, but this kingdom has God as its builder (Hebrews 11:10). Heaven is said to be "not made with hands" (2 Corinthians 5:1), to show its excellence. No man or angel could ever lay a stone in this building — God Himself erects this kingdom.

This kingdom surpasses in its riches. Gold does not surpass iron by as great a margin as this kingdom surpasses all other wealth. Its gates are made of pearl (Revelation 21:21), and its foundations are decorated with every kind of precious stone. It is said that kings will throw down their crowns and scepters before it, counting all their earthly glory as dust by comparison. This kingdom has God Himself as its treasure, and these riches are such that neither the human heart can conceive them nor the tongue of an angel express them.

This kingdom surpasses in its completeness. Other kingdoms are lacking — they must import from abroad what they cannot supply at home. King Solomon sent for gold to Ophir (2 Chronicles 8:18). But there is no deficiency in the kingdom of heaven. Revelation 21:7: "He who overcomes will inherit these things." Here is beauty, wisdom, glory, and magnificence. Here is the tree of life in the midst of this paradise. Everything is found here except sin and sorrow — and their absence only adds to the fullness.

This kingdom surpasses in its security. Other kingdoms live in fear of foreign invasion or internal division. Solomon's kingdom was peaceful for a time, but eventually he received a warning from his enemies (1 Kings 11:14). The kingdom of heaven, however, is so impregnable that it fears no hostile attack or invasion. The devils are said to be bound in chains (Jude 6). The saints in heaven will fear them no more than a person fears a thief who has been chained up and hanged. The gates of this heavenly kingdom are never shut, even by day (Revelation 21:25). We shut city gates when there is danger, but the gates of that kingdom stand always open — showing that no enemy can approach. The kingdom has gates to show its magnificence, but they are not shut because no security is needed.

This kingdom surpasses in its permanence. Other kingdoms have vanity written on them — they come to an end and are replaced. Though they may have a head of gold, they stand on feet of clay. Hosea 1:4: "I will bring the kingdom to an end." Kingdoms have their critical turning points. Where is the glory of Athens? The splendor of Troy? What has become of the Assyrian, Greek, and Persian empires? Those kingdoms have been demolished and buried in the dust. But the kingdom of heaven has eternity written

on it — it is an everlasting kingdom (2 Peter 1:11). Other kingdoms may last a long time, but not forever. The Apostle calls it "a kingdom which cannot be shaken" (Hebrews 12:28). It rests on an unshakeable foundation — the omnipotence of God — and runs parallel with eternity. Revelation 22:5: "They will reign forever and ever."

Showing that this kingdom will certainly and without fail be secured for the saints.

I will now establish the truth of this point — that the saints will possess this kingdom — on two grounds.

First, God's free grace: Luke 12:32: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom." God has freely resolved to do this. It is His will and good pleasure. God's will is the most unchangeable thing in existence.

Second, a price has been paid. Jesus Christ shed His blood for it. The saints' right to the kingdom was purchased by Christ's death. It is a purchased kingdom. Christ bought it with His blood — and shall we doubt whether the saints will receive what cost Christ so dearly?

The various conclusions and applications drawn from this point.

Use 1: This shows us that true religion is no unreasonable demand. God does not set us to work and then leave us without reward — godliness leads to a throne. When we hear of the doctrine of repentance — soaking our souls in tears of grief over sin — or the doctrine of self-denial, pulling out the right eye and putting the ruling sin to death — we are tempted to think it is a bitter pill to swallow. But the text gives us something to sweeten it with: there

is a kingdom at the end, and that makes up for everything. This glorious reward exceeds our thoughts as much as it surpasses what we deserve. No one can honestly say that God is a harsh master. God gives double wages — He bestows a kingdom on those who fear Him. Satan may slander the ways of God, like those spies who brought a bad report about the good land (Numbers 13:32). But will Satan improve your wages if you serve him? His payment is damnation — not a kingdom, but chains of darkness (Jude 6).

2. See here the mercy and generosity of God, who has prepared a kingdom for His people. It is already a favor that we poor worms of the earth are allowed to live at all. But that worms should be made kings — this is divine generosity beyond measure. It is mercy to pardon us, but it is lavish mercy to crown us. "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us!" Earthly rulers may give great gifts to their subjects but keep the kingdom for themselves. Though Pharaoh elevated Joseph to honor and gave him his own ring, he kept the kingdom to himself (Genesis 41:40): "Only in the throne will I be greater than you." But God gives a kingdom to His people — He sets them on the throne. How amazed David was at God's goodness in giving him an earthly kingdom (2 Samuel 7:18)! "Then David the king went in and sat before the Lord, and he said, 'Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?'" He marveled that God would take him from the sheepfold and set him on the throne — that God would turn his shepherd's staff into a scepter! How much more, then, should the saints stand in awe of the riches of grace — that God would give them a kingdom above all the princes of the earth, far above all heavens! God thinks nothing too good for His children. We often think twice before shedding a tear, offering a prayer, or sacrificing

a sin for Him. Yet He does not hesitate to give us a kingdom. How the saints will read over the lessons of free grace in heaven and trumpet forth the praises of the God who has crowned them with loving kindness!

3. This shows us that the Christian life is not a shameful thing. Wise people judge things by where they end up. Where does godliness end? It ends in a kingdom. Sin leads a person to shame (Proverbs 13:5; Romans 6:21): "What benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed?" But true religion leads to honor (Proverbs 4:8). It leads to a throne and a crown; it ends in glory. It is a fool's move for the sinner to reproach a saint — it is exactly as if Shimei had mocked David on the very day he was about to be crowned king. A saint's wisdom is to treat reproach with contempt. Say with David, when he danced before the ark: "I will be even more undignified than this" (2 Samuel 6:22). "If to pray, to hear, to serve my God is to be contemptible, then I will be more so. This is my excellence, my glory — I am doing now what will bring me to a kingdom." Think it no disgrace to be a Christian. I speak this especially to those who are just beginning to walk in God's ways. You may meet people who will mock and criticize you. Wear their mockery as a crown on your head and despise their criticism as much as their approval. Remember: there is a kingdom secured for godliness. Sin drags hell after it; grace draws a crown after it.

4. See here what should make God's people long for death — for in death they will enter their kingdom. The wicked may well fear death. It will not lead them to a kingdom but to a prison. Hell is the dungeon where they must lie rotting forever with the devil and his angels. For every person without Christ, death is the king

of terrors. But the godly may long for death — it will promote them to a kingdom. When Scipio's father had described the glory the soul would be clothed in at the resurrection, Scipio asked: "Then why do I linger so long on this earth? Why don't I hasten to die?" Believers are not completely happy until death. When Croesus asked Solon who he thought was the happiest person, Solon named one Tellus — a man who was already dead. At death a Christian will be fully installed in his honor. The anointing oil will be poured on him and the royal crown placed on his head. The Thracians celebrated at funerals with music. The pagans held funeral feasts, thinking the deceased had entered into a state of happiness. The saints are already heirs of the kingdom (James 2:5). Does not the heir long for the day of his coronation?

There is truly enough to loosen our grip on this world and make us willing to leave it. The saints eat ashes like bread here — they live in a condition of suffering. Psalm 141:7: "Our bones are scattered at the mouth of Sheol, as when one plows and breaks open the earth." When a man chops a tree, the chips fly in every direction — here a chip, there a chip. In the same way: here a saint wounded, there a saint killed. Our bodies are scattered like chips. "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long" (Romans 8:36). But a kingdom is coming — when the body is buried, the soul is crowned. Who would refuse to sail through a storm if he knew for certain he would be crowned the moment he reached shore? How strange that God's people look so grim at the thought of death, as though they were going to an execution rather than a coronation. Though we should be willing to remain here for a

while longer to serve God, we should still say with Paul: "I desire to depart and be with Christ." The day of a believer's death is the day of his inauguration.

Containing an examination and test of whether we belong to this kingdom.

Use 2: How can we know that this glorious kingdom will be ours at death? 1. If God has set up His kingdom within us. Luke 17:21: "The kingdom of God is within you." By the kingdom of God here is meant the kingdom of grace in the heart. Grace can be compared to a kingdom — it wields the scepter, it issues its laws, and there is the law of love. Grace tears down the devil's strongholds and brings the heart into a sweet submission to Christ. Has this kingdom of grace been established in your heart? Do you rule over your sins? Can you bind those proud rulers in chains? Are you a king over your pride, your anger, your unbelief? Is the kingdom of God within you? While others strive for earthly greatness and labor to build a kingdom around themselves, are you laboring to build a kingdom within yourself? Certainly, if the kingdom of grace is in your heart, you will have the kingdom of glory. If God's kingdom enters into you, you will enter into His kingdom. But let no one ever think to reign in glory who lives as a slave to his desires.

If you are a believer, you will go to this blessed kingdom. James 2:5: "Rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." Faith is a heroic act of the soul — it makes a bold step toward God on the basis of a promise. This is the crowning grace. Faith places us in Christ, and our title to the crown comes through Christ. Through faith we are born of God and become children of the royal blood-

line. Through faith our hearts are purified (Acts 15:9), and so we are made fit for a kingdom. "Rich in faith, heirs of the kingdom." Faith paves the road to heaven. Believers die as heirs to the crown.

The person with a noble, kingly spirit will go to the heavenly kingdom. "Set your mind on the things above" (Colossians 3:2). Do you live in the world while rising above it? The eagle does not catch flies — she soars high in the sky. Do you long for glory and immortality? Do you have a bold, royal spirit — a heavenly ambition? Do you care about the favor of God, the peace of the church, and the salvation of your soul? Do you despise what is base and beneath you? Alexander would not compete at the Olympic games — he considered them too small for him. Can you trample on all earthly things? Is heaven in your sight, Christ in your heart, and the world under your feet? The person with such a kingly spirit — one who sets his sights on nothing less than a crown — will dwell on high and have his throne set far above all heavens.

A sincere exhortation to Christians.

Use 3: Exhortation. This exhortation looks in two directions — first, toward the wicked. There is a kingdom to be had — a kingdom gleaming and shining with glory. Do not foolishly disqualify yourself from this honor. Do not forfeit a kingdom to satisfy a base desire. Do not drink away a kingdom. Do not trade the crown of life for a moment of pleasure. If people would pause before sinning and soberly consider whether the immediate satisfaction of sin was worth losing a kingdom, I believe it would send a chill through them and put some restraint on their uncontrolled desires. Jacob grabbed Esau by the heel. Do not look at sin's smiling face — grab it by the heel and look at where it leads. It will rob you of a kingdom. And can anything make up for that loss? Is it not madness to

lose a kingdom for the worthless works of darkness (Ephesians 5:11)? On the last day, how the devil will mock and laugh at people who were so foolish as to trade a crown for a toy — Like those native people who give away their gold for pictures and glass beads. It will add greatly to the torment of the damned to realize how stupidly they threw away a kingdom.

This exhortation also looks toward the godly, and it urges two things. First: there is a kingdom held in reserve for you. Let this motivate you to faithful service. Give all the service you can to God while you live. Spend yourself fully. The reward is honorable. The thought of a kingdom should add wings to prayer and fire to zeal. "What honor and recognition has been given to Mordecai?" asked King Ahasuerus (Esther 6:3). Ask yourself: What have I done for God? What love have you shown for His name? What zeal have you shown for His glory? Where is the head of that Goliath-sin you have slain for His sake? We should sometimes withdraw to our private rooms and weep over how little we have done for God. How vast the gap between our service and our reward! What is all our weeping and fasting compared to a kingdom? Make the most of every opportunity to serve God. Turn seasons of grace into opportunities for service.

To move you to act more vigorously for God, know this and be assured: the more work you do, the more glory you will have. Every saint will have a kingdom — but the more service any person renders to God, the greater that kingdom will be. There are degrees of glory, which I establish as follows:

First, because there are degrees of torment in hell (Luke 20:47): "These will receive greater condemnation." Those who use religion as a cover for their sin will have a hotter place in hell. Now

if there are degrees of torment in hell, then by the opposite principle, there are degrees of glory in the kingdom of heaven.

Second, since God in His grace rewards people according to their works, the more service they do, the greater their reward will be. Revelation 22:12: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." The one who has done more will receive more. The servant whose pound earned ten more was made ruler over ten cities (Luke 19:16). This should strongly motivate us to excellence in the Christian life. The brighter the lamp of your grace shines here, the more brightly you will shine in the heavenly realm. Do you want your crown to be brighter, your kingdom larger, your palm branches more flourishing? Be a Christian of high degree — do much work in a short time. While you are pouring out for God, God is storing up for you. The more glory you bring to God, the more glory you will receive from God.

Walk worthy of this kingdom (1 Thessalonians 2:12): "that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." Live as kings. Let the majesty of holiness be visible in your faces. Those who looked at Stephen saw his face was like the face of an angel (Acts 6:15). A kind of angelic brightness was visible in him. When we shine in zeal, humility, and seriousness, it honors and beautifies us in the eyes of others — and makes us appear as those who are heirs apparent to a crown.

Use 4: Here is comfort for God's people who are poor. God has prepared a kingdom for them. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." A child of God is often so low in this world that he has not a foot of land to call his own. He is poor in pocket as well as poor in spirit. But here is a fountain of consolation opened up: the poorest saint,

who has lost everything, is heir to a kingdom — a kingdom that surpasses all the kingdoms and dominions of this world more than a pearl surpasses brass. It is peerless and endless. The hope of a kingdom, says Basil, should carry a Christian forward with courage and joy through all his afflictions. And Luther said: "The ocean of God's mercy overflowing in spiritual blessings should drown all the sufferings of this present life." What if you walk in rags now? You will have your white robes. What if you are fed like Daniel on plain food? You will feast when you enter the kingdom. Here you drink the water of tears — but soon you will drink the wine of paradise. Take comfort in the thought of a kingdom.

CHAPTER 6



Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are those who mourn."

There are eight steps leading to true blessedness. They might be compared to Jacob's Ladder, whose top reached heaven. We have climbed the first step. Now let us move to the second. "Blessed are those who mourn." We must pass through the valley of tears on the way to paradise. Mourning would be a sad and bleak subject if it were not surrounded by blessedness at the front and comfort at the back. Mourning here stands for repentance — it includes both the grief, which is the cloud, and the tears, which are the rain. In this golden shower, God comes down to us. The text has two parts. First, a statement: those who mourn are blessed people. Second, a reason: because they will be comforted. I begin with the first — the statement: those who mourn are blessed. Luke 6:21: "Blessed are you who weep now." Though the saints' tears are bitter, they are nonetheless blessed tears.

Question: But will all mourning give a person a claim to blessedness?

Answer: No. There are two kinds of mourning that are far from making anyone blessed.

There is a worldly mourning. There is a diabolical mourning.

First, there is worldly mourning — grieving over outward losses. Matthew 2:18: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children." There are many tears of this kind. Many people can mourn over a dead child but cannot mourn over a crucified Savior. Worldly grief speeds us toward the grave. 2 Corinthians 7:10: "The sorrow of the world produces death."

Second, there is a diabolical mourning, and this takes two forms.

First, when a person mourns because he cannot gratify his sinful desire — this is like the devil, whose greatest torment is that he cannot be more wicked. So Amnon was sick with grief until he violated his sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13:2). So Ahab mourned over Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:4): "He lay down on his bed and turned away his face and would eat no food." This was a diabolical mourning.

Second, when people are sorry for the good they have done. Pharaoh was grieved that he had let the Israelites go (Exodus 14:5). Some people are so spiritually corrupt that they regret having prayed or heard so many sermons. They repent of their repentance. But if we repent of the good we have done, God will not repent of the judgment that is coming.

Showing what true holy mourning is directed toward.

To explain this point of holy mourning, I will show what it properly looks toward. There are two objects of spiritual mourning: sin and suffering.

First, sin — and this in two forms: our own sin and the sins of others.

First, our own sin. Sin demands tears. Nothing is truly worthy of weeping except sin. While we carry the fire of sin within us, we must carry the water of tears to put it out. Ezekiel 7:16. "They are not blessed who mourn for the dead," says Chrysostom, "but those who mourn for sin." And there is good reason to mourn for sin, when we consider: first, the guilt of sin, which exposes us to God's wrath. Would not a guilty person weep, knowing he is bound over to stand trial? Every sinner faces trial for his life and is certain to be condemned unless mercy speaks on his behalf. Second, the pollution of sin. Sin is a plague-spot on the soul — will you not labor to wash it away with your tears? Sin makes a person worse than a snake or a toad. The snake carries nothing but what God placed in it, and even its venom has medicinal uses. But the sinner carries what the devil has put into him (Acts 5:3): "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" What a strange transformation sin has brought about! The soul that once shone with brightness has been darkened by sin. We carry in our hearts the seed of the unforgivable sin. We carry the seeds of all the sins for which the damned are now being tormented. Shall we not mourn? The person who does not mourn has surely lost the use of his reason. But not every mourning over sin is the right kind that gives a claim to blessedness. I will show:

What is not true gospel mourning for sin. What is true gospel mourning for sin.

What is not true gospel mourning for sin: there are five false and counterfeit kinds of mourning.

First, a despairing kind of mourning — such as Judas's mourning. He saw his sin, he was sorry, he confessed, he declared Christ innocent, he tried to make restitution (Matthew 27). Judas, who is

in hell, did more than many people do today. He confessed his sin. He did not plead necessity or good intentions — he openly acknowledged his guilt: "I have sinned." Judas made restitution. His conscience told him the money was obtained wickedly. It was blood money, and he brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests (Matthew 27:3). Yet how many people today seize what belongs to others and never breathe a word about making it right! In that respect, Judas was more honest than they are. So where was Judas's sorrow lacking? It was a grief joined with despair. He believed his wound was wider than any bandage could cover. He drowned in tears, but it was not a repentance that led to life — it led to death.

Second, a hypocritical mourning. The heart is very deceitful — it can betray as readily with a tear as with a kiss. Saul appears to be a mourner. Just as he was sometimes found among the prophets (1 Samuel 10:12), so he seemed at other times to be among the penitents (1 Samuel 15:25): "And Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord.'" But Saul's mourning was hypocritical. For first, he did not take shame to himself — he actually sought to preserve his honor (verse 30): "Honor me before the elders of my people." Second, he minimized and made excuses for his sin to make it look smaller. He blamed the people (verse 24): "I feared the people and listened to their voice." A true mourner works to describe his sin in its true colors, highlighting every serious dimension of it, so that he may be deeply humbled before the Lord (Ezra 9:6): "Our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens." The true penitent tries to make his sin look as serious as it is. Saul tried to make his sin look as small as possible — like a patient

who plays down his symptoms for fear the doctor will prescribe too harsh a remedy. How easy it is to deceive one's own soul and to weep one's way into hell through hypocrisy!

Third, a forced mourning — when tears are dragged out by God's judgments. These are like the tears of a man in agony from kidney stones, or a man stretched on the rack. Such was Cain's mourning (Genesis 4:13): "My punishment is greater than I can bear." His punishment troubled him more than his sin. To mourn only out of fear of hell is like a thief who weeps over his sentence rather than his crime. The tears of the wicked are squeezed out by the heat of affliction.

Fourth, an outward mourning — when grief exists only on the surface. "They disfigure their faces" (Matthew 6:16). The eye is moist but the heart is hard. Such was Ahab's mourning (1 Kings 21:27): "He tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about despondently." His clothes were torn, but his heart was not torn. He wore sackcloth but had no genuine sorrow. He hung his head like a reed, but his heart was like granite. Many can be compared to weeping marble — both watery and flinty at once.

Fifth, a pointless and fruitless mourning. Some will shed a few tears but go right on living as badly as before. They cheat and live in immorality without change. There is something like this kind of mourning in hell — the damned weep, but they also blaspheme.

What is true gospel mourning?

Answer: The mourning that gives a person a claim to blessedness has these characteristics.

First, it is free and spontaneous — it must flow like water from a spring, not be struck out like sparks from a flint. Tears for sin must be like myrrh that drips from a tree freely, without cutting or forcing. Mary Magdalene's repentance was freely given — she stood weeping (Luke 7). She came to Christ with ointment in her hand, love in her heart, and tears in her eyes. God accepts a freewill offering. He is not pleased by what is forced out of us.

Second, gospel mourning is spiritual — meaning we mourn more for sin itself than for the suffering it brings. Pharaoh said: "Take away this plague." He never thought about the plague in his own heart. A sinner mourns because punishment follows hard on the heels of sin. But David cries out: "My sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3). God had warned that the sword would circle through David's family — but David does not say, "The sword is ever before me." He says, "My sin is ever before me." The offense against God was what troubled him. He grieved more over the act of treason than over the executioner's axe. So the repentant prodigal (Luke 15:21): "I have sinned against heaven and in your sight." He does not say: "I am starving among the pigs." He says: "I have offended my father." More specifically, our mourning for sin, if it is truly spiritual, must operate in three particular ways.

First, we must mourn for sin as an act of hostility and rebellion against God. Sin does not merely make us unlike God — it makes us contrary to God (Leviticus 26:40): "They walked contrary to Me." Sin defies and resists the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). Sin is contrary to God's nature. God is holy; sin is filth. Sin is contrary to God's will. Where God is of one mind, sin is of the opposite mind. Sin does everything it can to oppose God. The Hebrew word for sin

means rebellion — a sinner is a rebel. When we mourn for sin as walking in open defiance of heaven, that is gospel mourning. Nature cannot tolerate opposites.

Second, we must mourn for sin as the deepest ingratitude — as kicking against the mercies of God. God sends His Son to redeem us, His Spirit to comfort us. We sin against the blood of Christ and the grace of the Spirit — and shall we not mourn? We complain about the unkindness of others. Shall we not feel the weight of our own unkindness toward God? Caesar took it as a bitter personal blow that his son Brutus was among those who stabbed him — "You too, my son?" Can the Lord not say to us: "These wounds I have received in the house of those who love Me" (Zechariah 13:6)? Israel took their gold jewelry and made a calf of it. The sinner takes the gifts of God's mercies and uses them to commit sin. Ingratitude dyes a sin deeply red. This is why they are called crimson sins (Isaiah 1:18). Sins against the love shown in the Gospel are in some sense worse than the sins of the demons, because the demons were never offered grace. When we mourn for sin as stained with this mark of ingratitude, that is true gospel mourning.

Third, we must mourn for sin as something that robs us of good. Sin keeps blessing away from us and breaks our communion with God. Mary wept over Christ's absence (John 20:13): "They have taken away my Lord." In the same way, our sins have taken away our Lord — they have robbed us of His sweet presence. Would not a person grieve who had lost a precious jewel? When we mourn for sin under this aspect — as the thing that causes the Sun of Righteousness to withdraw from our horizon — when we mourn not so much because peace is gone or prosperity is gone, but because God is gone (Song of Solomon 5:6): "My beloved had with-

drawn himself" — This is holy mourning. Mourning over the loss of God's favor is the very best way to regain it. If you lose a friend, all your weeping will not bring him back. But if you have lost God's presence, your mourning will bring your God back again.

Third, gospel mourning sends the soul toward God. When the prodigal son came to himself, he went back to his father (Luke 15:18): "I will get up and go to my father." Jacob wept and prayed (Hosea 12:4). The Israelites wept and offered sacrifice (Judges 2:5). Gospel mourning moves a person to action — because true sorrow contains a thread of hope, and hope drives the soul to use the means God has provided. The mourning that, like the flaming sword, keeps the soul away from God and beats it back from duty is a sinful mourning — a sorrow hatched in hell. Such was Saul's grief, which drove him to the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:7). Gospel mourning is a spur to prayer. The child who weeps for offending his father goes into his father's presence and will not leave until reconciliation is made. Absalom could not be at peace until he had seen the king's face (2 Samuel 14:32-33).

Fourth, gospel mourning is directed at specific sins. The true penitent is like a wounded man who goes to the surgeon and shows him every wound. So the true penitent grieves over his particular sins (Judges 10:10): "We have served the Baals." David puts his finger on the exact sin that wounded him (Psalm 51:4): "I have done this evil." A wicked man says in general terms that he is a sinner. A child of God says: "I have done this evil." Peter wept specifically for the sin of denying Christ. Clement of Alexandria says Peter never heard a rooster crow without breaking into tears. There must be specific repentance before there can be a general pardon.

Fifth, gospel tears must fall from eyes of faith (Mark 9:24): "Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, 'I do believe... help my unbelief.'" Our spiritual sickness must move us to mourn. But when we look up to our physician — who has made a healing remedy from His own blood — we must not grieve without hope. Though our tears fall to the ground, our faith must reach to heaven. After the heaviest rain, faith must appear like a rainbow in the cloud. The tears of faith are collected like precious wine (Psalm 56:8).

Sixth, gospel mourning is joined with self-loathing. The sinner admires himself; the true penitent loathes himself. Ezekiel 20:43: "There you will remember your ways and all your deeds with which you have defiled yourselves; and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for all the evil things that you have done." A true penitent is troubled not only over the shameful consequences of sin but over sin's repulsive nature — not only the sting of sin, but its ugly face. How the leper loathed himself (Leviticus 13:45)! The Hebrew teachers say the leper declared unclean was to cover his upper lip both as a mourner and as a sign of shame. The true mourner cries out: "These corrupt eyes, this heart that is a den of wickedness!" He does not merely leave sin — he despises it. The one who has fallen in the mud loathes himself.

Seventh, gospel mourning must purify us. Our tears must make us more holy. We must weep for sin in a way that weeps sin out of us. Our tears must drown our sins. We must not only mourn but also turn (Joel 2:12): "Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning." What is the point of a wet eye and a corrupt heart? It is foolish to say it is daytime when the sky is full of darkness. In the same way, to say you repent while

your life remains dark with sin is foolish. Augustine put it well: the person who truly mourns over sins he has committed is the one who never commits again what he has mourned over. True mourning is like the water of bitterness — it causes the thigh of sin to rot (Numbers 5:12). Psalm 74:13: "You broke the heads of the sea monsters in the water." The heads of our sins — these monsters — are broken in the waters of true repentance. True tears are cleansing — like a flood that sweeps away all the wreckage of our sins. The waters of holy mourning are like the river Jordan, in which Naaman washed and was healed of his leprosy. It is said that a certain river in Sicily will turn the darkest sheep white when they bathe in it. In the same way, though our sins be as scarlet, by washing in this river of repentance they become white as snow. Naturalists say the serpent vomits its poison before going to drink. Be wise as serpents in this: before expecting to drink down the sweet comfort of God's promises, cast out the poison that lies in your heart. Do not merely mourn for sin — break away from it.

Eighth, gospel mourning must be joined with hatred of sin (2 Corinthians 7:11): "What indignation it produced in you!" We must not merely stop sinning — we must detest sin. The dove hates even the smallest feather of a hawk. A true mourner hates even the smallest impulse toward sin — a true mourner is a sin-hater. Amnon hated Tamar more fiercely than he had ever wanted her (2 Samuel 13:15). To be a sin-hater involves two things: first, to see sin as the worst of all evils — a complex evil more terrible to look at than death or hell; second, to be unrelentingly hostile toward it. A sin-hater will never negotiate any truce with sin. The war between him and sin is like the war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam (1

Kings 14:30): "There was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all their days." Anger can be resolved; hatred cannot. True mourning begins in love for God and ends in hatred of sin.

Ninth, gospel mourning in certain cases requires restitution. It is as much a sin to damage another person's reputation as to violate their purity. If we have harmed the reputation of others, we are obligated to ask their forgiveness. If we have wronged them in their property through dishonest or fraudulent dealings, we must make some compensation. So Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8): "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much" — in accordance with that law (Exodus 22:1). James urges us to attend not only to the heart but to the hand (James 4:8): "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts." If you have wronged another person, cleanse your hands through restitution. Be assured: without restitution, there is no remission.

Tenth, gospel mourning must be prompt. We must not put off repentance and delay it until our deathbed. As David said, "I will pay my vows now" (Psalm 116:14), so a Christian should say: "I will mourn for sin now." Luke 6:21: "Blessed are you who weep now." When the Roman envoy Popilius was sent to King Antiochus, he drew a circle around the king in the sand and told him to give his answer before stepping out of it. In the same way, God has drawn a circle around us within the small span of our lives and calls us to grieve over our sins immediately. Acts 17:30: "God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent." We do not know whether we will be given another day. Do not delay your mourning for sin until you are making your will. Do not think that holy mourning is only a deathbed duty. You may seek the blessing with tears, like Esau, when it is too late. "How long," asks

Augustine, "shall I say I will repent tomorrow? Why not now?" Delay brings danger. Caesar's failure to read a letter warning him before entering the Senate cost him his life. The true mourner hurries to meet an angry God — just as Jacob hurried to meet his brother Esau. And the gift he sends ahead is the sacrifice of tears.

Eleventh, gospel mourning for sin must be ongoing. Some people will shed a few tears at a sermon, but this flash flood quickly dries up. The hypocrite's sorrow is like a vein that is opened for a moment and then immediately closed again. The Hebrew word for "eye" can also mean "a fountain" — suggesting that the eye should flow like a fountain for sin and not stop. But it must not be like the Libyan fountain of the sun that the ancients described — hot in the morning, cold at noon. The waters of repentance must not overflow with greater heat in the early morning of first hearing the gospel, only to grow cold in the middle of life, when health and prosperity arrive. No — it must be a daily weeping. As Paul said (1 Corinthians 15:31): "I die daily," so should a Christian say: "I mourn daily." Therefore keep the channel of holy sorrow open and do not let it be stopped up until death (Lamentations 2:18): "Let your eyes have no rest." It is said of the godly John Bradford that scarcely a day passed without him shedding some tears over sin. Daily mourning is a powerful protection against backsliding. I have read of someone who had epilepsy — a falling sickness — and was cured by being immersed in seawater. In the same way, washing our souls daily in the briny waters of repentance is the best means both to prevent and to cure falling into sin again.

Even God's own children must mourn after receiving pardon — for God does not in one act pardon both past and future sins. As repentance is renewed, so pardon is renewed. If God were to par-

don future sins before they are committed, this would make part of Christ's intercessory work unnecessary. What need would there be for His ongoing intercession if sin were forgiven before it was even committed? The godly face daily sins of fresh incursion that must be mourned over. Though sin is pardoned, it still rebels. Though it is covered, it is not cured (Romans 7:23). There is in even the best Christian something that is contrary to God — something that deserves hell. Shall he not mourn? A ship that is always taking on water must have the water constantly pumped out. While the soul leaks through sin, we must keep pumping through repentance. Christian, do not think your sins are washed away by Christ's blood alone — it is by water and blood together. The bronze basin (Exodus 30:18) in which the Israelites were to wash was a fitting picture of this spiritual cleansing — tears and blood. When holy mourning has all these characteristics, this is what Paul calls "sorrowing in a godly manner" (2 Corinthians 7:11) — the mourning that makes a Christian eternally blessed.

Showing that we must also mourn for the sins of others.

Just as we must mourn for our own sins, we must also take the sins of others to heart. The poets imagined that Byblis was turned into a fountain. In the same spirit, we should wish with Jeremiah that our eyes were a fountain of tears, so that we might weep day and night for the wickedness of the age. Our blessed Savior mourned over the sins of the Jews (Mark 3:5), grieved over the hardness and callousness of their hearts. And holy David, looking on the sins of the wicked, felt his heart turn into a spring and his eyes into rivers (Psalm 119:136): "My eyes shed streams of water, because they do not keep Your law." Lot's righteous soul was tormented by the vile conduct of the wicked around him (2 Peter 2:7).

Lot took the sins of Sodom and used them as spears to pierce his own soul. Cyprian records that in the early church, when a young woman who had consecrated herself to God defiled her chastity, shame and grief spread across the whole face of the congregation.

Do we not have reason to mourn for the sins of others? The whole foundation of the nation is ready to crack under the weight of sin. What a flood of wickedness surrounds us! Mourn for the hypocrisy of the age. Jehu said: "Come, see my zeal for the Lord" — but his zeal was really for the throne. This is the hypocrisy of some: they attribute God's authority to everything they do. They boldly use God's name to cover their wickedness — as if a thief were to claim the king's warrant for his robbery. Micah 3:11: "Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, her priests instruct for a price, her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord saying, 'Is not the Lord in our midst?'" Many strike the gospel a fatal blow with a pious kiss. Could Ahab not be satisfied with murdering and seizing Naboth's land — did he also have to bring religion into it and use a fast as a preface to his murder (1 Kings 21:12)? A hypocrite dressed in white is the most dangerous devil. A burning torch in the hands of a ghost is the most terrifying sight. Hearing God's name in the mouths of scandalous hypocrites is enough to drive others away from the Christian faith altogether.

Mourn for the errors and blasphemies of the nation. There is now a free market for false teaching. Toleration has given people a license to believe anything. Whatever heresy was buried long ago in the history of the church has now been dug up from the grave and is being worshipped by some. England has become as reckless in her religion as she is extreme in her fashions. The Jesuits' mar-

ketplace is open, and almost everyone wants the very latest opinion. If people's faces changed as fast as their beliefs, we would not recognize them.

Mourn for the breaking of covenants. This sin hangs like a flying scroll over England. Breaking covenant is spiritual adultery — and for this, God may name us Lo-ammi and hand us a certificate of divorce.

Mourn for the pride of the nation — our circumstances are low, but our hearts are high. Mourn for the godlessness of the land. England is like the man in the Gospel (Luke 4:33) who was possessed by an unclean spirit. Mourn for the moving of ancient boundaries (Deuteronomy 27:17). Mourn for the contempt shown to lawful authority — the spitting in the face of order and governance. Mourn that there are so few mourners. Surely if we do not mourn for the sins of others, it is a sign we are not even aware of our own sins. God regards us as partakers in the guilt of sins in others that we fail to lament. Our tears may help to turn away God's wrath.

Showing that we must also mourn for the sufferings of the Church.

The saints are members of Christ's body — both the spiritual body and the body politic — and therefore they must feel the wounds suffered by God's Church. Psalm 137:1: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." The people of Israel, cut off from public worship, sat by the rivers and wept. They laid aside their instruments: "We hung our

harps on the willows." We were as far from joy as those willows were from bearing fruit. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" We were more fit to weep than to sing.

When we consider the sufferings of many Christians in Germany, Savoy, and other foreign lands — driven from their homes because they would not abandon the Protestant faith and adopt the Roman religion; given a crucifix instead of a Bible, the mass instead of prayer — when we think on these things, our eyes should overflow. Mourn to see God's Church as a bleeding vine. Mourn to see Christ's bride with garments soaked in blood.

We can hear England's funeral bell tolling. Let us shed tears over a dying England. Let us lament our internal divisions — England's divisions have been deadly; they once opened the door to the Saxons, Danes, and Normans. If a divided house cannot stand, how do we stand except by a miracle of free grace? Truth has fallen and peace has fled. England's beautiful coat of peace has been torn — like Joseph's coat, dipped in blood. Peace is the glory of a nation. When it is cut off, the whole body of the nation begins to wither.

Mourn for the oppressions of England. The people of this land have spent their money only to purchase grief.

Showing the proper seasons for holy mourning.

Though we must always keep the channel of godly sorrow open, there are certain seasons when our tears should overflow — as water sometimes rises higher. There are three special seasons of extraordinary mourning — times when the soul should be, as it were, at high tide.

First, when there are signs of God's wrath breaking out over the nation. England has been under God's correcting rod for many years. The Lord has drawn the sword, and it has not yet been put away. Oh, that our tears might blunt the edge of that sword! When God is treading things down, now is the time to break up the hardened ground of our hearts. Isaiah 22:4-5: "Therefore I say, 'Turn your eyes away from me, let me weep bitterly. Do not try to comfort me concerning the destruction... for it is a day of panic.'" Joel 2:2, 13: "A day of darkness and gloom" — "Therefore return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning." Rain follows thunder. When God thunders over a nation with His judgments, showers of tears must follow. When God strikes us on the back, we must strike ourselves on the thigh (Jeremiah 31:19). When God seems to stand at the threshold of the temple, as if He were about to take flight and leave, then is the time to lie weeping between the porch and the altar (Ezekiel 10:4). If the Lord seems to be withdrawing and taking His gospel away with Him, it is now urgent to mourn — so that perhaps our tears may move His compassion.

Second, before performing solemn acts of worship — such as days of fasting or receiving the Lord's Supper. Christian, are you about to seek God in an extraordinary way? Seek Him with grief (Luke 2:48). Do you want to see the smiles of God's face and feel the nearness of His presence? Open every spring of mourning — and then God will draw near to you in the ordinance and say: "Here I am" (Isaiah 58:9). When Jacob wept, he found God at Bethel (Hosea 12:4). He named the place Peniel, for he said: "I

have seen God face to face" (Genesis 32:30). Give Christ the wine of your tears to drink, and in the Sacrament He will give you the wine of His blood.

Third, after falling into a serious sin. I will not say with Donatus that there is no mercy for those who fall into sin again — but I will say there is no mercy without bitter mourning. Serious sins bring dishonor on the Christian faith (2 Samuel 12:14). Now our faces should be covered with shame and our eyes wet with tears. Peter, after denying Christ, wept bitterly. Christian, has God allowed you to fall into a serious sin as a just response to your pride and self-confidence? Go into the weeping chamber. Sins of weakness wound the soul, but grave public sins wound the gospel. Smaller sins grieve the Spirit, but greater sins torment the Spirit (Isaiah 63:10). And if that blessed Dove weeps, shall we not weep? When the sky is dark, the dew falls. When we have by serious sin darkened the light of the gospel, now is the time for the dew of holy tears to fall from our eyes.

Showing the degree of holy mourning required.

After the seasons of mourning, let us consider the degree of it. Mourning for sin must be a very deep mourning. The Greek word implies a great sorrow — the kind seen at the funeral of a dearly loved friend. Zechariah 12:10: "They will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son." The grief for an only child is profound. Such must be the grief for sin. Verse 11: "In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo." In that valley, Josiah — that righteous and much-loved king — was cut down by an untimely death, and his funeral was

marked by bitter lamentation. With such bitterness must we mourn — not for the death, but for the life, of our sins. To show the measure of sorrow required:

First, our mourning for sin must be greater than any other grief we experience. Eli's mourning for the loss of the ark swallowed up his grief over the deaths of his two sons. Spiritual grief must outweigh everything else. We should mourn more for sin than for the loss of loved ones or possessions.

Second, we should press for our sorrow to rise to the same height as our sin. Manasseh was a great sinner and became a great mourner (2 Chronicles 33:12): "He humbled himself greatly." Manasseh had made the streets run with blood, and he made his prison in Babylon run with tears. Peter wept bitterly. A true mourner strives to make his repentance as deep as his sin was great.

Showing the opposite of holy mourning.

Having shown the nature of mourning, I will now show what its opposite is. The opposite of mourning is hardness of heart, which Scripture calls a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36). A heart of stone is far from mourning or softening. This heart of stone is known by two symptoms.

First, insensitivity. A stone cannot feel anything. Pile weight on it, grind it to powder — it feels nothing. So it is with a hard heart — it has no sense of sin or of God's wrath. A kidney stone is felt; a stone in the heart is not. Ephesians 4:19: "Having become callous, they have given themselves over to sensuality."

Second, a hard heart is known by its rigidity. A stone will not bend. Whatever is rigid does not yield to pressure. So it is with a hard heart — it will not submit to God's command or bow to Christ's authority. A hard heart will sooner be shattered by death than bent by repentance. It is so far from yielding to God that — like an anvil — it sends the hammer back. It resists the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51).

Christians, if you want to be genuine mourners, guard against this hardness of heart. Hebrews 3:8: "Do not harden your hearts." A hard heart is the worst kind. If it were bronze, it could be melted in a furnace. If iron, it could be shaped with a hammer. But a heart of stone can only be broken by the arm of God and softened by the blood of God. The misery of a hard heart is threefold. First, a hard heart holds no grace at all. While wax is hard, it will not take the impression of a seal. While the heart is hard, it will not receive the stamp of grace. It must first be made soft and pliable. The plow of the Word cannot break up a hard heart. Second, a hard heart is good for nothing except to fuel hell's fire. Romans 2:5: "Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself." Hell is full of hard hearts. There is not one soft heart there. There is weeping there, but no softness. We read of "vessels prepared for destruction" (Romans 9:22). Impenitence prepares these vessels for hell and makes them like dry wood — ready to burn. Third, hardness of heart makes a person's condition worse than all his other sins combined. If someone has committed great sins but can still mourn, there is hope. Repentance unravels sin — it makes sin as if it had never been. But hardness of heart chains guilt firmly to the soul and seals a person under wrath. It is not the severity of sin but the hardness of heart that damns. This is what

makes the sin against the Holy Spirit beyond the reach of mercy — the person who has committed it is beyond the reach of repentance.

CHAPTER 7



Use 1: This teaching brings a charge against several kinds of people. A reproof.

First, it reproves those who think of themselves as good Christians but have never learned the art of holy mourning. Luther calls mourning a rare herb. People have tears for all sorts of things, but none to spare for their sins. There are many who complain but few who mourn. Most are like the stony ground that lacked moisture (Matthew 13). We hear many complaining about hard times but find few who are troubled by their hard hearts. Hot and dry is the worst condition for the body. Surely to be hot in sin and so dry as to have no tears is the worst condition for the soul. How many are like Gideon's dry fleece, like the mountains of Gilboa — no dew falls on them. Did Christ bleed for sin, and can you not weep? If God's bottle is not filled with your tears, His vial will be filled with wrath. We have many sinners in Zion but few mourners in Zion. For most people it is as with a man asleep at the top of a ship's mast. The winds blow, the waves pound, the ship is on the edge of sinking — and he sleeps right through it. So when the waves of sin have all but covered people, and the storm of God's wrath blows and threatens to drive them into hell — they sleep on, undisturbed.

Second, it reproves those who, instead of weeping for sin, fill their days with laughter and pleasure-seeking. Instead of mourners we have revelers. "They take the tambourine and harp... they spend their days in prosperity" (Job 21:12-13). They do not grieve in their souls but pamper their flesh. They live like pleasure-seekers and die like atheists. James tells us to turn our laughter to mourning (James 4:9) — but they turn their mourning to laughter. Samson was brought out to entertain the Philistines (Judges 16:25). The jovial sinner provides entertainment for the devil. Theophylact observed: one of the worst sights is a sinner going laughing to hell. How out of place it is to take up the harp and lyre when God is taking up the sword! Ezekiel 21:9-10: "A sword, a sword is sharpened and also polished. Should we then make mirth?" This is a sin that enrages God. Isaiah 22:12-13: "In that day the Lord God of hosts called for weeping and mourning... but instead there is joy and merrymaking, slaughtering cattle and killing sheep, eating meat and drinking wine. 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die.'" "But the Lord of hosts revealed Himself to me: 'Surely this iniquity shall not be forgiven you until you die.'" That is: this sin will not be wiped out by any sacrifice — vengeance will pursue you forever.

Third, it reproves those who, instead of mourning over sin, take pleasure in sin. Proverbs 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 2:12: those "who take pleasure in wickedness." Wicked people are in this sense worse off than the damned in hell — for the damned take little pleasure in their sins. Some are so boldly corrupt that they make themselves and others laugh about their sins. Sin is a sickness of the soul (Luke 5:31). Would a person make jokes about his own disease? You poor wretch — did Christ bleed for sin, and do you

laugh at sin? Is what grieves the Spirit your idea of entertainment? Is it the right time for a man to crack jokes when he is standing on the scaffold with the executioner's blade above his head? You who laugh at sin now — the day is coming when God will laugh at your disaster (Proverbs 1:26).

Fourth, it reproves those who attack the teaching of mourning for sin. These are like the Philistines who stopped up the wells (Genesis 26:15). They want to stop up the wells of holy sorrow. Antinomians call this a legalistic teaching. But Christ Himself preaches it here: "Blessed are those who mourn." The Apostles preached it too (Mark 6:12): "They went out and preached that people should repent." True sincerity will move a person to mourn over sin. The one who has the heart of a child cannot help but weep over his unkindness toward God. Mourning for sin is the very fruit and product of the Spirit of grace (Zechariah 12:10). Those who attack repentance are attacking the Spirit of grace. Mourning for sin is the only way to hold back God's wrath. Those who would tear down this pillar are working to bring God's judgment down on the land. To all such people I say what Peter said to Simon Magus (Acts 8:22): "Repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you." Repent of having cried down repentance.

CHAPTER 8



Motivations for holy mourning.

Use 2: Let me urge Christians to holy mourning. I am calling for the kind of mourning that prepares the soul for blessedness. Oh that our hearts were like distilling vessels, drawing out the water of holy tears! Christ's doves weep. Ezekiel 7:16: "Those who escape will be on the mountains like doves of the valleys, all of them mourning, each over his own iniquity." There are several compelling reasons to pursue holy mourning.

First, tears cannot be put to better use. If you weep over outward losses, you waste your tears — like a shower of rain on bare rock, which does no good. But tears shed for sin are blessed tears. "Blessed are those who mourn." These tears poison our corruptions. Salt water kills worms. The salty water of repenting tears helps kill the worm of sin that would gnaw at the conscience.

Second, gospel mourning is evidence of grace. Zechariah 12:10: "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn." The Holy Spirit descended on Christ like a dove (Matthew 3). The dove is a creature that weeps. Where there is a dove-like weeping, it is a

strong sign that the Spirit of God has descended there. Weeping for sin is a sign of the new birth. As soon as a child is born, it weeps. Exodus 2:6: "And behold, the boy was crying." To weep sincerely for sin is a good sign that we have been born of God. Mourning shows a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). A stone will not melt. When the heart is in a softened, melting state, it is a sign the heart of stone has been removed.

Third, consider the preciousness of tears. Tears dropping from a sorrowful, repentant eye are like water distilled from roses — very sweet and precious to God. A fountain in a garden makes it pleasant and beautiful. The heart most delightful to God is the one that has a spring of sorrow flowing through it. Mary stood at Christ's feet weeping (Luke 7:38). Her tears were more fragrant and sweet than her ointment. Incense smells sweetest when it is crushed. When the heart is broken over sin, our worship gives off its sweetest fragrance. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). Bernard calls tears "the wine of angels." God greatly values tears — otherwise He would not keep a bottle for them (Psalm 56:8). One writer calls tears a rich sacrifice — which under the old covenant was the most acceptable (Leviticus 3:3). Jerome calls mourning "a plank after shipwreck." Chrysostom calls tears "a sponge to wipe off sin." Tears are powerful advocates for mercy. Eusebius reports that in Athens there was an altar where no sacrifice was offered except tears — as if even the pagans sensed that nothing better could pacify an angry god than weeping. Jacob wept, and overcame the angel (Hosea 12:4). Tears melt the heart of God. When a criminal comes weeping before the judge, it moves the judge to mercy. When a person comes weeping in prayer, striking his chest and saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" —

this moves God's heart toward him. "Prayer," says Jerome, "inclines God to show mercy; tears compel Him." God seals His pardons on hearts that have been melted. Tears, though silent, have a voice (Psalm 6:8). Tears wash away sin. Rain melts and washes away a ball of snow. Tears of repentance wash away sin. "That sin," says Ambrose, "which cannot be defended by argument may be washed away by tears."

Fourth, consider the sweetness of tears. Mourning is the path to solid joy. The sweetest wine is what comes from the press of the eyes. The soul is never more relieved than when it can weep. Tears shed in private are better than the finest music at court. When the heart is heavy, weeping eases it by releasing the pressure. The soul of a Christian is most relieved when it can release itself through holy mourning. Chrysostom notes that David, who was the great mourner in Israel, was also the sweet singer in Israel. Psalm 42:3: "My tears have been my food." On which Ambrose comments: "No food is as sweet as tears." "The tears of the penitent," says Bernard, "are sweeter than all worldly joy." A Christian sometimes feels as if he is in the suburbs of heaven when he can truly weep. When Hannah had wept, she went away and was no longer sad. Sugar tastes sweetest as it melts. When a Christian melts in tears, that is when his joy is sweetest. When Pharaoh's daughter went down into the river, she found the baby there among the reeds. So when we descend into the river of repenting tears, we find the child Jesus there — who will wipe every tear from our eyes. Chrysostom was right to solemnly thank God for giving us this washing pool of tears in which to cleanse ourselves.

Fifth, the mourner for sin does good not only to himself but to others — he helps to hold back God's wrath from the land. Just as when Abraham was about to bring down the knife, the angel stayed his hand (Genesis 22:12), so when God is about to destroy a nation, the mourner stays His hand. A child's tears sometimes move an angry father to spare the child. Tears of repentance move God's heart and restrain His hand. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, was a powerful intercessor. God said to him: "Do not pray for this people" (Jeremiah 7:16) — as if the Lord was saying: "Jeremiah, your prayers and tears are so powerful that if you pray, I cannot deny you." Tears have a mighty influence with God. Surely God still has some mourners in this land — or He would have destroyed us long before now.

Sixth, holy mourning is preventive medicine. Our mourning for sin here will prevent mourning in hell. Hell is a place of weeping (Matthew 8:12). The damned mingle their drink with tears. God is said to collect our tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8). Those who refuse to shed a bottle's worth of tears now will one day shed rivers of them. Luke 6:25: "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." You have seen sugar left in a damp place dissolve into water. All the sweet pleasures of the wicked dissolve at last into tears. Now our tears will do us good. This is the right season for weeping — like a shower in spring. If we do not weep now, it will be too late. If we could hear what the damned say, they are now cursing themselves for not weeping soon enough. Is it not better to have our hell here than in eternity? Is it not better to shed tears of repentance than tears of despair? The person who weeps here is a blessed mourner. The person who weeps in hell is a cursed

mourner. A physician, by drawing a patient's blood, prevents death. By opening the vein of holy sorrow, we prevent the death of our souls.

Seventh, the Gospel prescribes no other path to blessedness but this one: "Blessed are those who mourn." This is the road that leads to the New Jerusalem. There may be multiple roads leading to a city, with travelers coming from different directions. But there is only one way to heaven — through the house of weeping (Acts 26:20). A person might think: "If I cannot mourn for sin, I will reach heaven another way. I will attend church, give to the poor, live a decent life." But I tell you there is only one path to blessedness, and it runs through the valley of tears. If you do not take that path, you will miss paradise. Luke 13:3: "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." There are many lines that converge on a center point. But the heavenly center has only one line leading to it — a tear dropping from the eye of faith. A physical illness may be treated with twenty different remedies. Sin is a sickness of the soul that is deadly. But there is only one medicine that heals it — the medicine of repentance.

Eighth, consider how much every Christian needs to be practiced in holy mourning. A person can take medicine when he doesn't need it. Many go to the baths out of curiosity rather than necessity. But everyone truly needs to enter the weeping bath! Think what a sinner you have been. You have filled God's book with your debts — how greatly you need to fill His bottle with your tears! You who have lived in secret sin — God assigns you this repentance: mourn over your sin. But perhaps someone may say: "I have no need to mourn, for I have lived a very decent life." Go home and mourn because you are only decent. Many a person's re-

spectable life, when leaned upon as a foundation, has been what condemned him. It is sad for people to live without repentance, but it is worse to think they have no need of it (Luke 15:7).

Ninth, tears are only for a season. It is only for a little while that we will weep. After a few showers fall from our eyes, we will have perpetual sunshine. In heaven the bottle of tears is sealed shut (Revelation 7:17): "God will wipe every tear from their eyes." When sin ceases, tears will cease. Psalm 30:5: "Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning." In the morning of resurrection, every tear will be wiped away.

Tenth, consider the benefits of holy mourning. Our greatest blessings come by water.

First, mourning makes the soul fruitful in grace. When rain falls, herbs and plants grow. Isaiah 16:9: "I will weep with the weeping of Jazer for the vine of Sibmah." By way of application: tears water our graces and make them flourish. Psalm 104:10: "He sends forth springs in the valleys." The valleys flourish with grain because the springs flow there. Where the springs of sorrow flow, the heart bears a fruitful harvest. Leah had tender eyes — she was a weeper — and she was fruitful. The tender-eyed Christian usually brings forth more of the fruits of the Spirit. A weeping eye is the watering can that keeps our graces alive.

Second, mourning protects us against the devil's temptations. Temptations are called "flaming arrows" (Ephesians 6:16), because they literally set the soul on fire. Temptations inflame anger and arouse lust. The waters of holy mourning quench these flaming arrows. Wet powder will not catch fire easily. When the heart has been moistened and softened by sorrow, it will not so readily catch

the fire of temptation. Tears are the best instruments for putting out the devil's fire. Since there is such great benefit in gospel sorrow, let every Christian wash his face each morning in the pool of tears.

Eleventh, and finally: a melting, tender spirit is a strong sign of God's presence with us in worship. It is a sign that the Sun of Righteousness has risen upon us when our frozen hearts begin to thaw and melt over sin. Bernard said: "By this you can know whether you have truly met with God in a spiritual duty — when you find yourselves in a melting and mourning frame of heart." We tend to measure everything by the feeling of comfort. We think we never have God's presence in worship unless we experience joy. In this we are like Thomas: "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands," he said, "I will not believe" (John 20:25). In the same way, we are prone to say: "Unless I feel floods of comfort, I will not believe I have found God in this duty." But if our hearts can melt sincerely in tears of love, this is a real sign that God has been with us. As Jacob said (Genesis 28:16): "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." So, Christian, when your heart breaks for sin and dissolves into holy tears — God is in that moment with you, even if you do not realize it.

All that has been said should make us spiritual mourners. Perhaps we have tried to mourn and found we could not. But as a man who has dug many feet into the earth looking for water and finds none at last keeps digging until he strikes a spring — so though we have been digging for the water of tears and finding none, let us weigh all these reasons and set our hearts to the work again. Perhaps at last we will be able to say, as Isaac's servants did

(Genesis 26:32): "We have found water." When herbs are pressed, their watery juice comes out. These eleven serious reasons may press tears from the eye.

Question: But someone may say: "My nature is such that I cannot weep. I might as well try to squeeze water from a rock as get a tear from myself."

Answer: But if you cannot weep for sin, can you grieve? Inward mourning of the heart is the best kind. Sorrow can be real even when there are no tears. A vessel may be completely full even if it has no outlet. It is not so much the weeping eye that God values as the broken heart. Yet I would not want to stop the tears of those who can weep. God looked on Hezekiah's tears (Isaiah 38:5): "I have seen your tears." David's tears made music in God's ears (Psalm 6:8): "The Lord has heard the voice of my weeping." It is a sight fit for angels to behold — tears like pearls falling from a repentant eye.

CHAPTER 9



Showing the obstacles to holy mourning.

Question: What should we do to bring our heart into this mourning condition?

Answer: Do two things. First, guard against the things that will block the channels of mourning.

Second, actively use all the means that will help foster holy mourning.

Guard against the things that block the flow of tears. There are nine obstacles to mourning.

First, love of sin. Love of sin is like a stone lodged in a pipe, blocking the flow of water. Love of sin makes sin taste sweet, and that sweetness casts a spell over the heart. Jerome says it is worse to love sin than to commit it. A person can be overtaken by sin (Galatians 6:1), and someone who stumbles into sin unexpectedly will weep over it. But love of sin hardens the heart and keeps the devil in control. True mourning requires genuine grief over sin — but how can a person grieve over what his heart is in love with? Beware of this sweet poison. Love of sin freezes the soul in unrepentance.

Second, despair. Despair insults God, treats Christ's blood as worthless, and destroys the soul. Jeremiah 8:12: "They said, 'It is hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.'" This is the voice of despair: "There is no hope — I might as well keep on sinning and be damned for something." Despair presents God to the soul as a judge clothed in garments of vengeance (Isaiah 59:17). Judas's despair was in some ways worse than his betrayal. Despair destroys repentance, because the proper foundation of repentance is mercy. Romans 2:4: "The kindness of God leads you to repentance." But despair hides mercy from sight, like the cloud that covered the ark. Beware of this. Despair is an irrational sin — there is no grounds for it. The Lord shows mercy to thousands. Why might you not be one of those thousands? The wings of God's mercy, like the wings of the cherubim, are spread out over every humble, repentant person. Though you have been a great sinner, if you are a weeping sinner there is a golden scepter of mercy extended toward you (Psalm 103:11). Despair locks the soul in unrepentance.

Third, the idea that mourning will make us miserable — that we will drown all our joy in tears. But this is a mistake. Lose our joy? Tell me what joy a person in their natural, unconverted state actually has. What joy does sin give? Is not sin compared to a wound and a bruise (Isaiah 1:6)? David had his bones broken (Psalm 51:8). Is there any comfort in having bones out of joint? Does not sin produce a trembling and fearfulness of heart (Deuteronomy 28:66)? Is it any joy for a person to be a terror to himself? Surely of the sinner's laughter it can be said: "It is madness" (Ecclesiastes 2:2). Holy mourning, on the contrary, is the

producer of joy. It does not extinguish joy — it refines it and makes it better. The prodigal son dated his joy from the moment of his repentance (Luke 15:24): "They began to celebrate."

Fourth, suppressing the movements of the Spirit. The Spirit moves us to mourn — it produces all our spiritual springs (Psalm 87:7): "All my springs are in You." We often experience gracious impulses toward prayer and repentance. When we suppress these impulses — which is called "quenching the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19) — we are blocking the tide from coming in. When dew falls, the ground becomes wet. When the Spirit of God falls like dew on the soul, it is moistened with sorrow. But when the Spirit withdraws, the soul is like Gideon's dry fleece. A ship can no more sail without wind, and a bird can no more fly without wings, than we can mourn without the Spirit. Beware of grieving the Spirit. Do not drive this gentle Dove from the ark of your soul. The Spirit is tender and sensitive. If grieved, it may say: "I will come no more." And if it withdraws, we will not be able to mourn.

Fifth, presuming on mercy. Who will work hard on his heart or mourn over sin if he thinks he can be saved at a lower cost? How many people, like spiders, draw damnation out of the sweet flower of God's mercy! Jesus Christ, who came into the world to save sinners, is the occasion of many people's destruction. Someone says: "Christ died for me — He has done it all. Why do I need to pray or mourn?" Many a bold sinner plucks death from the tree of life and — through presumption — climbs to hell by the very ladder of Christ's blood by which others climb to heaven. It is a tragedy when God's goodness, which should lead to repentance (Romans 2:4), leads instead to presumption. Sinner, do not hope your way into hell. Beware of being damned through a false confidence. You

say God is merciful, and so you continue boldly in sin. But for whom is that mercy — the presuming sinner or the mourning sinner? Isaiah 55:7: "Let the wicked forsake his way... and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him." No mercy without forsaking sin, and no forsaking sin without mourning. If a king were to announce to a group of rebels: "Whoever comes in and surrenders shall have mercy" — those who remained in open rebellion could not claim the benefit of that pardon. God offers mercy to those who mourn. Those who are not mourners have no claim on it. God's mercy is like the ark — only the priests were to handle it. Only those who are priests to God and have offered up the sacrifice of tears may touch this golden ark of mercy (Revelation 1:6).

Sixth, thinking sin is small. Genesis 19:20: "Is it not a small thing?" The devil holds the wrong end of the telescope to sinners — making sin look tiny in the distance. Thinking sin is smaller than it is is very dangerous. A wrong opinion about sin's size keeps us from seeking the remedy. Who will urgently call for a doctor if he thinks his illness is trivial? And who will seek God with a repentant heart if he thinks sin is a minor matter? But to correct this wrong thinking about sin, and to help us view it with tears, consider:

Sin cannot be small, because it is committed against the majesty of heaven. There is no such thing as minor treason — treason against the king is always a capital offense.

Second, every sin is sinful — and therefore deadly. A penknife or a thin blade makes a small wound, but either of them can kill just as effectively as a larger weapon. There is death and hell in every sin (Romans 6:23). What was it for Adam to pick a piece of fruit? But that act cost him his crown. Sin is not like disease, where

some are mortal and some are not. The smallest sin, without repentance, will serve as a bolt to lock a person out of heaven forever.

Third, look at sin through the red lens of Christ's sufferings. Even the smallest sin cost the price of blood. If you want a true view of sin, go to Golgotha. Jesus Christ was forced to hide His glory, lose His joy, and pour out His soul as an offering — for the least of sins. Read the greatness of your sin in the depth of Christ's wounds. Do not let Satan throw such a fog before your eyes that you cannot see sin as it truly is. Remember: not only great rivers run into the sea, but small streams too. Not only great sins carry people to hell, but smaller ones as well.

Seventh, putting it off — the notion that it is too soon to start repenting. When the lamp is nearly burned out, the strength is spent, and old age arrives — then mourning for sin will be in order. But not yet. To show how dangerous this thinking is, and to roll away this stone from the mouth of the well so that the waters of repentance can flow, let me offer four serious and weighty considerations.

First, do you know what it means to be in a state of nature — and do you say it is too soon to get out of it? You are under God's wrath (John 3:36) — is it too soon to step out from under that? You are under the power of Satan (Acts 26:18) — is it too soon to escape from enemy territory?

Second, people do not reason this way in other areas of life. No one says: "It is too soon to become wealthy." They do not put off gaining the world until old age — they seize the first opportunity. If

it is not too soon to become wealthy, can it be too soon to become godly? Is repentance not the most important matter of all? Is it not more necessary to mourn over sin than to accumulate an estate?

Third, God's call to mourning demands an immediate response (Hebrews 3:7-8): "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." A general besieging a fortress summons it to surrender by a certain day — or face an assault. God's call to repentance works in the same way: "Today, if you hear His voice." Sinners — when Satan has tempted you to wickedness, you have never said "It is too soon, Satan." You embraced his temptation without hesitation. Have you never made Satan wait — and will you now make God wait?

Fourth, putting off mourning for sin is plain foolishness — for four reasons. First, the longer you delay holy mourning, the harder the work will be when you finally come to it. A dislocated bone is easier to reset right away than after time has passed. A disease caught early is more easily cured than one allowed to develop into a crisis. You can wade through a river when the water is low — wait until it has risen and it will be over your head. Sinner, the more offenses you pile up against heaven, the harder it will be to receive your pardon. The longer you extend your season of sinning, the more work you create for repentance. Second, putting off mourning for sin is foolish in light of the uncertainty of life. How does the procrastinating sinner know that he will live to old age? "What is your life? For you are a vapor" (James 4:14). How quickly may illness arrest you, and death cut you off? May not your sun set at noon? What foolishness it is to postpone mourning and stretch out the process when death may make short work of everything at any moment! Caesar's failure to read a letter of warning before enter-

ing the Senate house cost him his life. Third, it is foolish to put everything off until the last moment, because mercy at that point may not be available. Though God gives you time to repent, He may withhold the grace to repent. When God calls for mourning and you turn a deaf ear, when you finally call for mercy, God may be silent (Proverbs 1:24, 28). Think on this seriously: God may choose to execute judgment at the end of your life precisely because you refused to repent at the beginning of it. Fourth, saving your solemn turning to God until old age or sickness is deeply unwise, because such late acts of devotion are most often false and hollow. Though genuine mourning for sin is never too late, late mourning is seldom genuine. Repentance that comes with gray hair is rarely sincere. It is a fair question whether those autumn tears are shed more out of fear of hell than out of love for God. The sailor in a storm throws his cargo overboard — not because he doesn't value it, but because he fears it will sink the ship. When people finally break down weeping late in life and try to cast their sins overboard, it is usually only out of fear that those sins will sink them into hell. The genuine question is whether the deathbed penitent mourns because he can hold onto his sins no longer. All of this should make people think twice before running their souls into the desperate risk of leaving all their preparation for heaven to the final hour.

Eighth, the delay of God's judgment. Ecclesiastes 8:11: "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil." God holds back punishment, so people hold back repentance. He does not strike them on the back with correction, so they do not strike themselves on the thigh in humiliation

(Jeremiah 31:19). The sinner reasons: "God has spared me all this time. He has stretched out His patience. Surely He will not punish." Psalm 10:11: "He has said to himself, 'God has forgotten.'" God sometimes, in infinite patience, postpones His judgments and extends the day a little longer. He is not eager to punish (2 Peter 3:9). A bee naturally produces honey — it stings only when provoked. The Lord wants people to make peace with Him (Isaiah 27:5). God is not like a harsh creditor demanding immediate payment. He is not only gracious but waits to be gracious (Isaiah 30:18). God uses His patience to draw sinners to repentance. But how terribly this patience is abused! God's long-suffering hardens people. Because God restrains the bowl of His wrath, sinners shut off the flow of their tears. So that God's patience does not become an obstacle to holy mourning, let sinners remember: First, God's patience has limits (Genesis 6:3). Though people refuse to set limits on their sin, God does set limits on His patience. There is a point when the sun of God's patience will set — and once it sets, it never rises again. The lease of patience will soon expire. There is a moment when God says: "My Spirit will strive no longer." The angel cried: "The hour of His judgment has come" (Revelation 14:7). Perhaps at your very next sin, God may say: "Your hour has now come." Second, to be hardened under God's patience makes your situation far worse. Provoked justice will take revenge for abused patience. God was patient with Sodom — but when Sodom did not repent, He sent fire and brimstone raining down on them. Sodom, which was once a monument to God's patience, is now a permanent monument to God's severity. All its plants and fruit are destroyed. And as Tertullian says, that place still smells of fire and brimstone. Long forbearance is not forgiveness. God may hold

back the blow for a time, but justice is not dead — only sleeping. God has slow feet but an iron hand. The longer God takes to strike, the harder the blow when it falls. The longer a stone falls before hitting, the heavier the impact. The longer God is sharpening His sword, the sharper it cuts. Sins committed against patience are darker-colored than other sins. They are worse in some ways than the sins of the demons — the fallen angels never sinned against God's patience. How terrible will be the condition of those who sin precisely because God is patient! For every crumb of patience God extends, He adds a drop of wrath to His bowl. The longer God waits for a sinner, the more interest that sinner is certain to pay in hell.

Ninth, entertainment and pleasure. Amos 6:5: "Who improvise to the sound of the harp... who drink wine from sacrificial bowls." Instead of laments, people sing. Many laugh away sorrow and drown their tears in wine. The sweet waters of pleasure wash away the bitter waters of mourning. How many go dancing their way to hell — like fish that swim pleasantly into the Dead Sea! Let us guard against all these obstacles to holy tears. "Let my harp turn to mourning and my flute to the sound of those who weep" (Job 30:31).

CHAPTER 10



Showing some practical helps toward mourning.

Having cleared away the obstacles, let me now offer some practical helps toward holy mourning.

First, keep David's view of things constantly before you. Psalm 51:3: "My sin is ever before me." David, in order to remain a mourner, kept his eye fixed on his sin. Look at what sin truly is — and then tell me if there is not enough there to draw out tears. I can hardly find a word bad enough for it. One writer calls it the devil's excrement. Sin is a combination of every evil. It is the concentrated essence of every kind of harm. First, sin dishonors God. It denies God's ability to see all things. It mocks His patience. It distrusts His faithfulness. Sin tramples on God's law, treats His love with contempt, and grieves His Spirit. Second, sin harms us. Sin shames us (Proverbs 14:34): "Sin is a disgrace to any people." Sin has left us naked — it has stripped our robe from us and taken our crown away. It has robbed us of our glory. And not only has it made us naked, but filthy. Ezekiel 16:6: "I saw you wallowing in your blood." Sin has not only stripped off our fine clothing but has put on us dirty rags (Zechariah 3:3). God made us in His image (Genesis 1:26), but sin has made us like the animals that perish

(Psalm 49:12). We have all become brutish in our desires. And sin has made us not only like the animals but like the devil (John 8:44). Sin has stamped the devil's image on the human heart. Sin also stabs us. The sinner, like the jailer, draws a sword against himself. He has lost his right judgment, and like the demon-possessed man in the Gospels, he cuts himself with stones — though the stone in his own heart is so hard he cannot feel it. Every sin is a wound to the soul. As many sins, so many wounds. Every blow dealt to a tree helps cut it down. Every sin is another stroke hacking down the soul for hell's fire. If then there is all this evil in sin — if this forbidden fruit has such a bitter core — it ought to move us to mourn. Our hearts should be the spring and our eyes the rivers.

Second, if we want to be mourners, let us become petitioners. Beg for a spirit of genuine sorrow. Pray that God will put us in a posture of mourning and give us a softened heart. Let us pray for Achsah's blessing (Joshua 15:19): springs of water. Let us pray that our hearts may be spiritual distilling vessels, dropping tears into God's bottle. Let us pray that we who carry the poison of the serpent may also have the tears of the dove. The Spirit of God is a Spirit of mourning. Let us pray that God would pour that Spirit of grace on us, so that we might look on Him whom we have pierced, and mourn (Zechariah 12:10). God must breathe in His Spirit before we can breathe out our sorrows. The Spirit of God is like the heat under a distilling vessel, which draws up the moisture of grace from within the heart and causes it to drop from the eyes. It is this blessed Spirit whose gentle breath makes our graces give off their fragrance and our tears begin to flow. And once the spring of

mourning is opened in the heart, there will be no lack of joy — as tears flow out, comfort flows in. Which brings us to the second part of the text: "They shall be comforted."

CHAPTER 11



Showing the comforts that belong to mourners.
Matthew 5:4: "For they shall be comforted."

Having presented the dark side of the text, I will now show you the bright side: "they shall be comforted."

First observation: mourning comes before comfort, just as lancing a wound comes before healing. The Antinomian speaks of comfort but rejects mourning for sin. He is like a foolish patient who, given a medicinal pill coated in sugar, licks off the sugar and throws away the pill. The libertine is all for joy and comfort — he licks the sugar but throws away the bitter pill of repentance. If we are ever to have true comfort, we must have it in God's way and order. Sorrow for sin is what opens the door to joy. Isaiah 57:18: "I will heal him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners." The true sunshine of joy is the kind that follows a shower of tears. We might as well expect a harvest without seed as comfort without gospel mourning.

Second observation: God saves His best wine for last. He prescribes mourning for sin first, and then releases the wine of consolation. The devil does the opposite — he shows the best first and keeps the worst for last. First he shows the wine sparkling in the

glass — then comes the serpent's bite (Proverbs 23:32). Satan sets his finest dishes before people. He presents sin colored with beauty, sweetened with pleasure, and gilded with profit — and then afterward brings in the devastating bill. He showed Judas the shining silver bait first, then set the hook. This is why sin has so many followers — it shows the best first. First the golden crowns appear, and then come the lion's teeth (Revelation 9:7-8).

But God shows the worst first. He prescribes the bitter medicine first, and then brings the restorative: "they shall be comforted."

Third observation: gospel tears are not wasted — they are seeds of comfort. While the penitent pours out tears, God pours in joy. "If you want to be cheerful," says Chrysostom, "begin by being sorrowful." Psalm 126:5: "Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting." One of the very purposes of Christ's anointing and coming into the world was to comfort those who mourn (Isaiah 61:3). Christ received the oil of gladness (as Chrysostom says) so that He could pour it out on the mourner. No wonder the Apostle calls repentance something "not to be regretted" (2 Corinthians 7:10). A person's drunkenness is to be regretted. His immorality is to be regretted. But his repentance is never to be regretted — because it is the gateway to joy. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Here is sweet fruit from a bitter root. Christ had the stone vessels filled with water, and then turned the water into wine (John 2:9). So when the eye — that earthen vessel — has been filled to the brim with water, Christ will turn the water of tears into the wine of joy. "Holy mourning," says Basil, "is the seed from which the flower of eternal joy grows."

The reason why the mourner shall be comforted:

First, mourning is designed precisely for this purpose. It is not prescribed as an end in itself, but as a means to something else — to prepare the ground for comfort. This is why we sow in tears: so that we may reap in joy. Holy mourning is a spiritual medicine. Medicine is not prescribed for its own sake but for health's sake. In the same way, gospel mourning is appointed for this specific purpose: to produce joy.

Second, the spiritual mourner is the person most ready to receive comfort. When the heart is broken over sin, it is most ready to receive joy. God pours the golden oil of comfort into broken vessels. The mourner's heart is emptied of pride — and God fills the empty with His blessing. The mourner's tears have helped purge out corruption, and after the purging medicine, God provides a refreshing drink. The mourner is on the verge of fainting under the weight of sin — and then the cup of strength comes at exactly the right moment. The Lord desires the repentant person, after deep humiliation, to be comforted — lest he be overwhelmed by too much sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:7).

This is the mourner's privilege — he shall be comforted. The valley of tears leads the soul into a paradise of joy. The sinner's joy gives birth to sorrow; the mourner's sorrow gives birth to joy. John 16:22: "Your grief will be turned into joy." The saints have a wet sowing season but a joyful harvest. "They shall be comforted."

Showing the mourner's comforts in this present life.

To illustrate this further, I will show you what the comforts are that mourners shall receive. These comforts are of divine origin, and they come in two forms: comforts in this life and comforts in the life to come.

First, comforts in this life. They are called "the consolations of God" (Job 15:11) — meaning great comforts, the kind only God can give. They surpass all other comforts as far as heaven surpasses earth. The root from which these comforts grow is the blessed Spirit. He is called "the Comforter" (John 14:26), and comfort is listed as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Christ purchased peace; the Spirit speaks peace. Question: How does the Spirit comfort? Answer: Either through means or directly.

First, through means: by helping us apply the promises to ourselves and draw water from those wells of salvation. We lie like weak infants at the breast until the Spirit helps us to draw nourishment from a promise. When the Spirit has taught faith that skill, comfort begins to flow. How sweet is the nourishment of a promise!

Second, the Spirit comforts directly. By a more immediate act, the Spirit presents God to the soul as reconciled. He pours God's love into the heart, from which flows boundless joy (Romans 5:5). The Spirit quietly whispers the assurance of forgiveness, and the sight of a pardon opens the heart wide with joy (Matthew 9:2): "Take courage; your sins are forgiven."

To speak more fully to this, let me show you the qualities and excellencies of the comforts God gives His mourners. First, these comforts are genuine comforts. The Spirit of God cannot bear witness to what is untrue. There are many in this age who claim to offer comfort, but their comforts are mere illusions. The body can be swollen by air as well as flesh — in the same way, a person can be puffed up by false comfort just as by true. The saints' comforts are certain. They carry the seal of the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13; 2

Corinthians 1:22). A seal confirms — when a document is sealed, it is firm and beyond question. When a Christian has the seal of the Spirit stamped on his heart, he is confirmed in the love of God.

Question: In what ways do the Spirit's genuine comforts differ from those that are false and counterfeit?

Answer: In three ways. First, the comforts of God's Spirit are built on deep conviction (John 16:7-8). When He — that is, the Comforter (verse 7) — comes, He will convict the world of sin.

Question: Why does conviction come before consolation?

Answer: Conviction prepares the heart for comfort. Through conviction, the Spirit graciously disposes the heart toward two things. First, to seek Christ. Once the soul is convinced of sin and the judgment that follows it, a Savior becomes precious. When the Spirit has driven home the arrow of conviction, the poor soul cries out: "Where can I find Christ? Through what means can I come to know Him?" "Have you seen the One my soul loves?" "I would give everything for one glimpse of my Savior." Second, the Spirit through conviction makes the heart willing to receive Christ on His own terms. By nature, a person would bargain with Christ — he would take half of Christ. He would accept Christ as Savior but not as Lord. He would accept Christ as the one whose head is gold (Song of Solomon 5:11) but not as the one on whose shoulders the government rests (Isaiah 9:6). But when God loosens the spirit of conviction and shows a sinner his lost and ruined condition, he becomes willing to have Christ on any terms. When Paul was knocked to the ground by conviction, he cried out: "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Let God name whatever terms He will — the soul will agree to them. Now when a person is brought

to Christ's terms — to believe and to obey — he is ready for mercy. When the Spirit of God has acted as a spirit of conviction, it then becomes a spirit of consolation. When the plow of the law has gone over the heart and broken up the hardened ground, God then sows the seed of comfort.

Those who claim comfort but were never convicted or broken over sin have good reason to suspect that their comfort is a delusion of Satan. It is like a madman's joy — a person who imagines himself to be a king, but of whose laughter it may be said: "It is madness" (Ecclesiastes 2:2). The seed that lacked depth of soil withered away (Matthew 13). Comfort that lacks depth of soil — genuine humiliation and conviction — will likewise wither and come to nothing.

Second, the Spirit of God is a sanctifying Spirit before He is a comforting Spirit. Just as God's Spirit is called the Comforter, He is also called "a spirit of grace" (Zechariah 12:10). Grace is the work of the Spirit; comfort is the seal of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit comes before the sealing. The graces of the Spirit are compared to water (Isaiah 44:3), and the comforts of the Spirit are compared to oil (Isaiah 61:3). First God pours in the water of the Spirit — then comes the oil of gladness. By this we can test whether our comforts are genuine. Some speak of the comforting Spirit who never had the sanctifying Spirit. They claim assurance but never had grace. These are counterfeit joys. Such comforts will abandon people at death — they will end in terror and despair. God's Spirit will never put His seal on a blank. First, the heart must be an epistle written with the finger of the Holy Spirit — and only then is it sealed with the Spirit of promise.

Third, the comforts of the Spirit are humbling. The soul says: "Lord, who am I that I should receive a smile from heaven — that You should give me this personal token of Your love?" The more water poured into a bucket, the lower it sinks. The more heavily laden a ship is with precious cargo, the lower it rides in the water. The more a Christian is filled with the sweet comforts of the Spirit, the lower he bows in humility. The more heavily laden a tree is with fruit, the more the bough bends down. The more we are filled with the fruits of the Spirit — joy and peace (Galatians 5:22) — the more we bend down in humility. Paul, a chosen vessel filled with the wine of the Spirit, was as marked by lowliness as by joy (Ephesians 3:8): "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given." He who was the chief of the Apostles called himself the least of all the saints.

Those who claim to have comfort but are proud — who look down on others and have risen above the ordinary means of grace — their comforts are delusions. The devil is able not only to disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14) but can disguise himself as the Comforter. It is easy to counterfeit money — to plate brass in silver and stamp the king's image on it. The devil can plate false comforts in silver and make them look as though they bore the stamp of the King of heaven. The true comforts of God are humbling. Though they lift the heart up in gratitude, they do not puff it up in pride.

Second, the comforts God gives His mourners are pure — they contain no bitter ingredients. Worldly comforts are like wine that turns to dregs. There is guilt within that gnaws and corrodes. "Even in laughter the heart may be in pain" (Proverbs 14:13). Queen Mary once said that if she were opened, they would find

Calais written on her heart. If the conscience of a sinner were opened and examined, you would find a worm gnawing at his heart. Guilt is a wolf feeding inside his comfort. A sinner may wear a smiling face but carry a condemning conscience. His cheerfulness is like the mirth of a man deep in debt who lives in constant fear of being arrested. The comforts of wicked people are laced with bitterness — they are wormwood wine.

But spiritual comforts are pure. They are not muddled with guilt or mixed with fear. They are the pure wine of the Spirit. What the mourner experiences is joy — and nothing but joy.

Third, the comforts God gives His mourners are sweet. Ecclesiastes 11:7: "Truly the light is pleasant." So too is the light of God's countenance. How sweet are those comforts that bring the Comforter Himself along with them (John 14:16)? This is why the love of God poured into the heart is said to be "better than wine" (Song of Solomon 1:2). Wine delights the palate, but the love of God cheers the conscience. "The lips of Christ drip with liquid myrrh" (Song of Solomon 5:13). The comforts God gives are a Christian's music — the golden pot and the manna, the sweetest pleasures of the Christian life. They are the saints' festival, the delicacies of their banquet. So sweet are these divine comforts that the church fainted for lack of them (Song of Solomon 2:5): "Sustain me with raisin cakes." By these raisin cakes are meant the comforts of the Spirit. The Hebrew word conveys all varieties of delight — showing the boundless sweetness and pleasure of the Spirit's comforts. "Refresh me with apples." Apples are sweet to taste and fragrant in smell. So sweet and delightful are the apples that grow on the tree of paradise. These comforts from above are so sweet that they make all other comforts sweeter too — health, possessions, re-

relationships. They are like seasoning that makes all our earthly enjoyments taste better. At the same time, the comforts of the Spirit are so sweet that they greatly reduce our craving for worldly things. A person who has been drinking strong spirits will not feel much thirst for water. The person who has once tasted how good the Lord is (Psalm 34:8) and has drunk the cordials of the Spirit will not crave earthly delights with excessive longing. People who play with dogs and birds as pets are clearly those who have no children. Those who crave and love created things with disordered desire plainly reveal that they have never tasted anything better.

Fourth, the comforts God gives His mourners are holy comforts — "the comfort of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:31). Everything produces after its own kind. The Holy Spirit can no more produce impure joys in the soul than the sun can produce darkness. The person who has the Spirit's comfort looks on himself as someone called to serve God even more: "Has the Lord smiled on me? I can never pray enough. I can never love God enough." The Spirit's comforts stir up in the heart a holy hostility toward sin. The dove hates every feather that comes from the hawk. In the same way, there is a hatred of every impulse and temptation toward evil. A living creature resists everything that would destroy its life — it hates poison. So the one who has the Spirit's comforts living within him sets himself against those sins that would murder his comfort. Divine comforts bring the soul into closer fellowship with God (1 John 1:3): "Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

Fifth, the comforts reserved for mourners are filling comforts (Romans 15:13): "May the God of hope fill you with all joy." John 16:24: "Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made

full." When God pours in the joys of heaven, they fill the heart and make it overflow (2 Corinthians 7:4): "I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy." Outward comforts can no more fill the heart than a triangle can fill a circle. Spiritual joys are satisfying (Psalm 63:5): "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips." David's heart was full, and the joy burst out through his lips. Psalm 4:7: "You have put gladness in my heart." Worldly joys put gladness on the face (2 Corinthians 5:12). But the Spirit of God puts gladness in the heart. Divine joys are heart-joys (Zechariah 10:7; John 16:22): "Your heart will rejoice." "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47). And to show how completely filling these comforts of heavenly origin are, the psalmist says they create greater joy than when grain and oil are plentiful (Psalm 4:7). Wine and oil may delight, but they cannot satisfy — they have their emptiness. As Zechariah 10:2 says: "They comfort in vain." Outward comforts more readily bore than cheer, and more readily exhaust than fill. Xerxes offered great rewards to anyone who could invent a new pleasure. But the Spirit's comforts are satisfying. "Your consolations delight my soul" (Psalm 94:19). The difference between heavenly comforts and earthly is as great as the difference between an actual banquet and one painted on a wall.

Sixth, the comforts God gives His mourners in this life are glorious comforts. 1 Peter 1:8: "Joy inexpressible and full of glory." First, they are glorious because they are a foretaste of the joy we will have in a glorified state. These comforts are a down payment on glory — they bring us into heaven ahead of time (Ephesians 1:13-14): "You were sealed with the Holy Spirit, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance." The down payment is part of the full

payment that follows. So the Spirit's comforts are the cluster of grapes from Eshcol — the firstfruits of the heavenly Canaan (Numbers 13:23). Second, the Spirit's joys are glorious because, compared with them, all other joys are dim and unworthy. A worldly person's joy is airy, flashy, and low — he sucks nothing but dregs. Amos 6:13: "You who rejoice in a thing of nothing." A worldly spirit rejoices because he can say: "This house is mine, this estate is mine." But a gracious spirit rejoices because he can say: "This God is mine" (Psalm 48:14): "For this God is our God forever and ever." The foundation of a Christian's joy is glorious — he rejoices as an heir of the promise. The joy of a godly person is made of the very same substance as the joy of the angels. He exults in the light of God's countenance. His joy is Christ's own joy — he rejoices in the mystical union begun here on earth and completed in heaven. This is what makes the saints' joy a joy full of glory.

Seventh, the comforts God gives His mourners are infinitely transporting and overwhelming. They are so delightful and astonishing that they produce a kind of joy scholars say cannot be put into words. Of all things, joy is the hardest to describe. It is called joy inexpressible (1 Peter 1:8). You could sooner taste honey than explain how sweet it is. The most moving words can no more capture the comforts of the Spirit than the most skilled painter can put life and breath into a portrait. Even the angels cannot fully express the joys they experience. Some believers have been so overwhelmed by the sweet intensity of this joy that they could not contain themselves — much as Moses died from a kiss of God's own mouth. The glass is often shattered by the strength of the liquid poured into it.

Eighth, the comforts of the Spirit are powerful — they are strong restoratives. This is how the Apostle describes it (Hebrews 6:18): strong consolation. Divine comfort first strengthens us for duty. Nehemiah 8:10: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Joy sharpens diligence. A person filled with the comforts of God's Spirit goes through the duties of the Christian life with energy and enthusiasm. He believes firmly, loves fervently, and is carried forward at full sail — because the joy of the Lord is his strength. Second, divine comfort sustains us under affliction. 1 Thessalonians 1:6: "Having received the word in much tribulation, with joy." The wine of the Spirit can sweeten the bitter waters of hardship. Those who possess these heavenly comforts can gather grapes from thorns and find honey in the lion's carcass. These are truly strong comforts — they can stand firm in the fiery trial and turn the flame into a bed of roses. How powerful is a comfort that enables a Christian to glory in tribulation (Romans 5:3)? A believer is never so sorrowful that he cannot also rejoice. The bird of paradise sings even in winter. 2 Corinthians 6:10: "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing." When sickness comes, the assurance of forgiveness takes away the sting of pain. Isaiah 33:24: "No resident will say, 'I am sick.'" When death comes, a Christian rises above it. 1 Corinthians 15:55: "O death, where is your sting?" At the end of the rod, a Christian tastes honey. These are strong consolations indeed.

Ninth, the comforts God's mourners receive are heart-quieting comforts — they bring a sweet stillness and rest to the soul. The heart of a Christian is in a kind of restless trembling, like a compass needle — shaking and unsettled until the Comforter arrives. Some creatures cannot live without sunlight. In the same way, a

Christian is nearly lifeless unless he has the light of God's countenance shining on him. Psalm 143:7: "Do not hide Your face from me, or I will become like those who go down to the pit." Nothing but the breast quiets a nursing child. For the believer, it is only the breast of consolation that brings true quiet.

Tenth, the comforts of the Spirit are lasting comforts — just as they abound in us, so they remain with us. John 14:16: "He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever." Worldly comforts are always on the move, ready to fly away. They are like a flash flood or a bolt of lightning.

Everything in this world is passing away, but the comforts with which God feeds His mourners are immortal. 2 Thessalonians 2:16: "Who has loved us and given us eternal comfort." A Christian may not always have full, bright comfort — but there is always a dawning of it in his soul. He always has a foundation of hope and a root of joy. Something within him holds him up, and he would not give it up for anything.

Consider the mourner's privilege — he shall be comforted. David, the great mourner of Israel, was also the sweet singer of Israel. The weeping dove shall be covered with the golden feathers of comfort. How rare and wonderful are these comforts!

Question: But may God's mourners sometimes go without these comforts?

Answer: Spiritual mourners have a right to these comforts, yet they may sometimes lack them. God is a free agent — He reserves control over the timing of our comfort. The Holy One of Israel will not be limited. He maintains His sovereign right to give or withhold comfort as He chooses. If we go for a time without comfort,

we must not quarrel with His ways. A sailor cannot demand that the wind blow from the west when it blows from the east. A farmer cannot complain when God withholds rain during a drought. In the same way, no one should dispute with God when He withholds the sweet flow of comfort — we ought instead to rest quietly in His holy will.

Even so, while God may withhold comfort from the mourner by virtue of His sovereignty, there are specific reasons why mourners sometimes go without comfort. First, reasons that have to do with God. Second, reasons that have to do with themselves.

Reasons that have to do with God: He sees it best to withhold comfort at times. First, to increase our appreciation for grace. We tend to value comfort more than grace itself. So God locks away our comforts for a season to raise the value of grace in our eyes. When small coins circulate more freely than gold, a king may pull the small coins from circulation so that gold becomes more highly prized. Second, God wants His people to serve Him for who He is, not merely for the comfort He gives. It is a corrupted kind of love to treasure a husband's gifts and tokens more than the husband himself. Those who serve God only for comfort are not truly serving God — they are using Him to serve their own ends.

Most often, however, when God's mourners lack comfort, the reason lies with themselves.

First, mourners lack comfort through error, and this error takes two forms. The first error is going to the wrong source for comfort. People go to their tears when they should go to Christ's blood. Making our tears the basis of comfort is a kind of idolatry. Mourning is not something that earns comfort — it is the path to

joy, not the cause of it. Jacob received the blessing while wearing his older brother's garments. True comfort flows from Christ's side. Our tears remain stained until they are washed in the blood of Christ. John 16:33: "In Me you may have peace." The second error is the mistaken idea that mourners are privileged people who may therefore take greater liberty — loosening their commitment to duty and giving themselves over to sin. Christ has indeed purchased freedom for His people, but it is a holy freedom — not freedom to sin, but freedom from sin. 1 Peter 2:9: "You are a royal priesthood, a people for God's own possession." You are not slaves but royalty. What follows from that? Do not use Christian freedom as a cover for sin (1 Peter 2:16): "Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil." If we quench the sanctifying Spirit, God will quench the comforting Spirit. Sin is compared to a cloud (Isaiah 44:22), and this cloud blocks out the light of God's countenance.

Second, God's mourners sometimes lack comfort through discontent and irritability. David identifies his inner unrest as the source of his sadness (Psalm 43:5): "Why are you in despair, O my soul? Why have you become disturbed within me?" A discontented heart, like a rough sea, is not easily calmed. It is hard for a troubled spirit to receive comfort. This discontent arises from various causes — sometimes from outward grief and melancholy, sometimes from a kind of envy when God's people see others enjoying comfort while they lack it. In such moments they refuse comfort, and like a fussy child, push the breast away. Psalm 77:2: "My soul refused to be comforted." A discontented spirit is no more ready to receive comfort than a distracted person is ready to receive counsel. And where does the mourner's discontent come from but pride

— as though God had not dealt rightly with him by withholding comfort? Christian, your spirit must be more deeply humbled and broken before God pours out His golden oil of joy.

Third, the mourner lacks comfort because he is not applying the promises. He looks at his sin, which humbles him, but not at God's word, which would comfort him. The mourner's eyes are so full of tears that he cannot see the promise. The power and comfort of a medicine come from applying it. When the promises are applied by faith, they bring comfort (Hosea 2:19; Isaiah 49:15-16). Faith draws nourishment from the breast of a promise. To keep us from comfort, Satan's strategy is either to keep the promise from us so we never know it, or to keep us from the promise so we never apply it. Every promise in the Bible belongs to the mourner — if only he had the skill and willingness of faith to take hold of it.

Fourth, the mourner may lack comfort through excessive focus on earthly things. When we feed too heavily on earthly comforts, we miss heavenly ones. Isaiah 57:17: "Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry and struck him; I hid My face and was angry." Earth smothers fire. In the same way, worldliness extinguishes the flame of divine joy in the soul. A solar eclipse occurs when the moon — a dense body — comes between the earth and the sun. The moon is an image of the world (Revelation 12:1). When the world comes between us and God, there is an eclipse of the light of His face. Miners say there is a kind of damp that rises from the earth and puts out a candle's flame. Earthly comforts send up the same kind of damp and put out the light of spiritual joy.

Fifth, perhaps the mourner once had comfort but lost it. Adam's rib was taken from him while he slept (Genesis 2:21). Our comforts are similarly taken away when we fall asleep in spiritual carelessness. The bride in the Song of Songs lost her beloved when she lay on the bed of laziness (Song of Solomon 5:2, 6).

These are the reasons why God's mourners may lack comfort. But so that the spiritual mourner will not be too discouraged, let me offer the cup of consolation (Jeremiah 16:7) — a few words that may comfort the mourner even in the absence of comfort. First, Jesus Christ Himself was without comfort — so it is no wonder if we are. Our comforts are not greater than His were. He who was the Son of God's love was left without the felt sense of God's love. Second, the mourner still has a seed of comfort (Psalm 97:11): "Light is sown like seed for the righteous." Light here is a picture of comfort, and it is sown as seed. A child of God may not always have comfort in full bloom, but he always has it in seed. He may not feel comfort from God at the moment, yet he still takes comfort in God. Third, a Christian may be high in grace yet low in comfort. High mountains have few flowers. Gold mines yield little grain. A Christian's heart may be a rich mine of grace even when it feels barren of comfort. Fourth, the mourner is an heir to comfort. Though for a brief moment God may seem to forsake His people (Isaiah 54:7), the time is coming when all tears will be wiped away and the mourner will be filled with comfort. That joy is reserved for heaven — and this leads to the second part of the subject.

Showing the mourner's comforts in the life to come.

Second, the mourner's future comforts. They shall be comforted. In this life, God gives the mourner visits and tokens of love — but the great comforts are kept in store for what is ahead. In

God's presence there is fullness of joy. The time is coming when the saints will bathe in the river of life, when they will never again see a frown on God's face. His face will shine, His lips drop honey, His arms embrace them with sweetness. The saints will experience a high tide of joy that never ebbs. On that day the saints will set aside their mourning and exchange their black robes for white ones. Then the winter will be past, the rain of tears will be over and gone. Flowers of joy will appear. After the weeping of the dove, the time of singing will come (Song of Solomon 2:11-12). This is the great consolation — the eternal celebration of the blessed, which will never end. In this life God's people taste joy, but in heaven the full vessels will be opened. There is a river in the midst of the heavenly paradise, fed by an eternal fountain (Psalm 36:8-9).

The times we live in are dark and troubled, and it seems right to lift the hearts of God's people by speaking of the comforts He has reserved in heaven for those who mourn. They shall be comforted. Scripture most fittingly describes the greatness of these heavenly comforts through the image of a feast. Mourning will be turned into feasting. And it will be a wedding feast — celebrated with the greatest solemnity (Revelation 19:9): "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." Bullinger and Gregory the Great understand the supper of the Lamb as the saints dining with Christ in heaven. After long, hard labor, people sit down to supper. When the saints rest from their labors at last, they will dine with Christ in glory. Let us say something about this great final supper.

It will be a great supper, first, because of who hosts it — God Himself. This is a king's banquet, and therefore magnificent beyond description. Psalm 95:3: "The Lord is a great God and a great

King above all gods." Where else should you find splendor and glory but in the court of a king? Second, it will be a great supper because of what is served. The provision exceeds all description. What blessed fruit does the tree of life in paradise yield (Revelation 2:7)? Christ will lead His bride into the banquet hall and feast her on the finest delicacies — she will drink the spiced wine, the heavenly nectar, with which the angelic powers are endlessly refreshed.

First, every dish at this heavenly supper will be pleasing to the taste. There is nothing served here that we do not love. Christ will prepare exactly the food His bride delights in.

Second, there will be no shortage here — at a true feast there is never a lack. The inexhaustible fullness of Christ prevents any scarcity. And it will be a fullness without overindulgence, because fresh courses will continually be served.

Third, those who eat at this supper will never be hungry again. Hunger is a sharp pain. The Lamb's supper will not only satisfy hunger — it will end it entirely (Revelation 7:16): "They will hunger no more!"

Third, it will be a great supper because of the company invited. Good company adds to any feast and sharpens the appetite. Saints, angels, and archangels will be at this supper — and Christ Himself will be both host and guest. Scripture calls this an innumerable company (Hebrews 12). And what makes the gathering sweeter still is that there will be perfect love at this feast. The shared spirit will be: one heart, and one way. All the guests will be bound together by the golden chain of love.

Fourth, it will be a great supper because of the joy (Ecclesiastes 10:19): "A feast is made for laughter." At this supper there will be joy — nothing but joy (Psalm 16, final verse). There is no weeping at this feast. What triumph and celebration there will be! Two things at the Lamb's supper will fill the guests with joy. First, the saints will think of what they have been spared — a worse supper. The devil has a supper of his own — a grim banquet with two courses: weeping and gnashing of teeth. Every bite causes the heart to ache. Who would begrudge giving up earthly pleasures now, knowing what that other supper holds? Second, the joy at the Lamb's supper will come from the host Himself welcoming every guest. The saints will have God's smiling face and His embrace. He will lead them into the wine cellar and display the banner of His love over them. The saints will be as full of delight as they are of holiness. What is a feast without joy? Worldly happiness is fleeting and hollow. This joy will be endlessly delightful.

Fifth, it will be a great supper for the music. This is a wedding supper — and what music could be better than the Bridegroom's own voice, saying: my bride, my pure one, drink your fill of love. There will be the angels' anthems and the saints' songs of triumph. The angels, those heralds of heaven, will proclaim the greatness of God. And the saints, those glorious singers, will take down their harps from the willows and join the angels in a great concert of praise. Revelation 15:2-3: "I saw those who had been victorious over the beast, standing with harps of God. And they sang the song of Moses the bond-servant of God and the song of the Lamb, saying, 'Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations.'" The music at this feast will be harmony without a single false note.

Sixth, this supper is great because of where it is held — in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7). It is a magnificent palace, magnificent first for its location — it is in the highest place. Second, for its view: all brilliant beauties are gathered there. And the joy of the view is made richer by ownership — the best view is from your own land, looking out as far as the eye can see. Third, for its size. This royal feast will be held in the most spacious hall imaginable — a room infinitely larger than the entire visible universe. A single star in that universe, astronomers tell us, is larger than the whole earth. Though the guests are a multitude no one can count — from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7:9) — the table is long enough and the room large enough for all. The highest heaven, blazing with light, hung with glory, adorned beyond all description, set above every visible sphere — this is the place of the marriage supper. It infinitely surpasses the deepest human thought. I am no more able to describe it than I can measure the sky or weigh the earth on scales.

Seventh, it will be a great supper because it never ends. Those who live for pleasure have a short feast and a long bill to pay. But those who sit down at the heavenly banquet will never rise from the table. The feast will never be cleared away. They will go on forever feeding on the sweet delicacies set before them. King Ahasuerus held a feast for his princes that lasted one hundred and eighty days (Esther 1:4). But the blessed feast prepared for the saints lasts forever. Psalm 16:11: "In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever."

Application. This is a healing comfort for God's people — the very thing to keep their hearts from giving way. They shall be comforted. They will sit with Christ on the throne (Revelation 3:21),

and sit down with Him at the table. Who would not willingly mourn over sin, knowing such a reward awaits? They shall be comforted. The marriage supper will more than make up for the valley of tears. You who are now watering your pillow with tears and weeping bitterly over sin — at that last and great feast, your water will be turned to wine. You who now put sin to death and discipline yourself through prayer and fasting — you will soon dine with Christ and the angels. You who refused to reach for the forbidden fruit — you will feed from the tree of life in the paradise of God. You who are poor in this world, barely able to find bread to eat — remember for your comfort: in your Father's house there is bread in abundance, and He is even now preparing a feast for you, where every heavenly delight is served. Feed with joy on thoughts of this marriage supper. After your funeral comes your festival. Eagerly wait for supper-time.

Christ has already paid for this supper on the cross. There is no bill coming at the end — and so comfort one another with these words.

CHAPTER 12



Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

We come now to the third step on the path to blessedness: Christian meekness. Blessed are the meek. See how the Spirit of God adorns the inner life with a rich variety of graces. The Holy Spirit's work is not only beautiful but varied — He makes the heart meek, pure, and peaceable. The graces of the Spirit are compared to embroidery, which displays many different flowers and colors. In this verse there is a duty — meekness — and that duty, like the dove, brings an olive branch with it: they shall inherit the earth.

The main point I want to develop is this: meek people are blessed people. To understand this rightly, we need to recognize that meekness has two dimensions.

First, meekness toward God. Second, meekness toward other people.

First, meekness toward God — which involves two things.

First, submission to God's will. Second, openness to His word.

First, submission to God's will — carrying ourselves calmly, without complaint or bitterness, under the circumstances God brings our way. 1 Samuel 3:18: "It is the Lord; let Him do what seems good to Him." The meek-spirited Christian says: Let God do with me as He will. Let Him shape my circumstances as He pleases — I will submit. God knows what is best for me, whether a rich or a poor condition. Let Him design His work as He sees fit. It is enough that God has done it. Jonah showed an unmeek spirit when he pushed back against God (Jonah 4:9): "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."

Second, openness to God's word — being willing to let the word have full authority in our souls and being responsive to all its commands and truths. A person is spiritually meek when he conforms himself to the mind of God, and quarrels not with the instructions of the word but with the corruptions of his own heart. Cornelius's words to Peter showed a meek spirit (Acts 10:33): "Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." How wonderful it is when the word, which comes with great authority, is received with meekness (James 1:21)!

Second, meekness toward other people — what Basil the Great calls the permanent mark of a gracious soul. Blessed are the meek. To make this clear, let me explain what this meekness actually is. Meekness is a grace by which the Spirit of God enables us to keep our passions in check. First, it is a grace. The philosopher calls it a virtue, but the Apostle calls it a grace and lists it among the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). It is of divine origin. Second, through this grace we are enabled to moderate our passions. By nature, the heart is like a restless sea, churning up waves of anger and wrath.

Meekness calms those passions. It acts as a moderator in the soul, quieting and restraining its disordered impulses. Just as the moon moderates and softens the heat of the sun, Christian meekness cools the heat of passion. A meek spirit not only fits us for communion with God but for everyday relationships with other people. Meekness has a divine beauty and gentleness about it. It reflects well on the Christian faith and wins people over. This meekness consists of three things.

First, bearing injuries. Second, forgiving injuries. Third, returning good for evil.

First, meekness involves bearing injuries. Of this grace it may be said: it is not easily provoked. A meek spirit, like damp tinder, will not easily catch fire. Psalm 38:12-13: "Those who seek my life lay snares for me... but I, like a deaf man, do not hear." Meekness is a bridle on anger. The passions are fiery and headstrong, and meekness reins them in. Meekness also bridles the mouth — it keeps the tongue from saying things it should not. Meekness lives by this motto: bear and forbear. There are four things that stand opposed to meekness.

First, meekness is opposed to a hot temper (Ecclesiastes 7:9): "Do not be hasty in your spirit to be angry, for anger resides in the heart of fools." When the heart boils with passion and anger flashes in the eyes, that is far from meekness. Anger may visit a wise person, but it takes up residence in a fool. The quick-tempered person is like dry flax or gunpowder — no sooner do you touch him than he is completely ablaze. Basil calls anger a form of drunkenness, and Jerome says more people are drunk with passion than with wine. Seneca calls anger a brief fit of madness — it sometimes suspends the use of reason entirely. We tend to be cool

about the things that matter most and cold as ice in religion, yet burning hot in conflict. How unbecoming is rash anger — how it distorts and disfigures a person! Homer says of Agamemnon that when he controlled his passion, he resembled the gods — Jupiter in appearance, Pallas in wisdom. But when he was in a fury, he was a tiger. Nothing of Jupiter could be seen in him. Plato once advised the great drinkers of his day to look at themselves in a mirror while drunk — they would find themselves so repulsive that the sight would cure them. In the same way, let a man look at himself in a mirror when distorted by passion, and surely he would never wish to see himself that way again. Ephesians 4:26-27: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity." Someone may say: he has wronged me, and I will not give ground to him. But it is better to give ground to him than to give ground to the devil. A hot-tempered spirit is not a meek spirit. A caution: this does not mean we can never be angry. There is such a thing as holy anger. Anger directed against sin is anger without sin. Meekness and zeal can coexist. In matters of faith, a Christian must be clothed with the spirit of Elijah and filled with righteous indignation for the Lord (Jeremiah 6:11). Christ was meek (Matthew 11:29), yet zealous (John 2:14-15): "Zeal for Your house will consume Me."

Second, meekness is opposed to malice. Malice is the devil's portrait (John 8:44). Malice is murder committed in the mind (1 John 3:15), and it makes a person unfit for any spiritual duty. How can a malicious man pray? I have read of two men who lived in malice. When asked how they could say the Lord's Prayer, one said he was grateful there were many other good prayers besides that one. The other said that when he prayed the Lord's Prayer, he sim-

ply left out the words, "as we forgive those who trespass against us." But Augustine responds as if from God: Because you refuse to pray My prayer, I will not hear yours. Would it not be a terrible judgment if everything a man ate turned to poison? For a malicious person, that is exactly what happens with the holy ordinances of God. The Lord's table becomes a snare — he eats and drinks condemnation on himself. A malicious spirit is not a meek spirit.

Third, meekness is opposed to revenge. Malice is the scum of anger, and revenge is malice boiling over. Malice is a parasite that feeds on blood. Revenge is Satan's delight. Revenge is the choice dish that a malicious person sets before the devil. Scripture forbids revenge (Romans 12:19): "Never take your own revenge, beloved." To take revenge is to seize God's office from His hands — He is called the God of recompense (Jeremiah 51:56) and the God of vengeance (Psalm 94:1). I press this especially against those who challenge one another to duels. Spiritual duels are lawful — it is right to fight the devil (James 4:7): "Resist the devil." It is right to duel with oneself — the regenerate part against the flesh. Blessed is the person who takes revenge on his own sinful desires (2 Corinthians 7:11): "What a vindication of yourselves!" But other duels are unlawful. Take no revenge yourselves. Even the Turks, though a rough people, reportedly burned those who fought duels with hot coals — those consumed by the heat of revenge were fittingly punished with fire.

Objection: But if I am this meek and passive in bearing injuries and disrespect, I will ruin my reputation. It will be a mark against me.

First answer: Letting an injury go without revenge does not damage a person's reputation. Solomon tells us it is actually to a person's glory to overlook an offense (Proverbs 12:16). It is more honorable to bury an injury than to avenge it, and to let it go than to record it. The weakest creatures are the quickest to turn and sting at the slightest touch. The lion, a far more noble creature, is not easily provoked. The thorn bush tears at you; the oak and cedar are more peaceable. Passion signals weakness. A noble spirit overlooks an injury.

Second answer: Suppose a person's reputation did suffer in the eyes of those whose judgment is not worth valuing — consider which is worse: shame or sin? Would you sin against God in order to protect your reputation? It is poor wisdom to risk your life to win back your honor, or to run toward hell in order to be thought courageous.

First caution: This does not mean a person cannot defend himself when his life is in danger. Some of the Anabaptists teach that it is never lawful to take up a sword under any circumstances. But a person may clearly take up arms to preserve his own life. Not to do so would violate the sixth commandment — it would amount to self-murder. When a person takes up arms in self-defense, he is not seeking someone else's death so much as safeguarding his own life. His intention is not to harm but to prevent harm. Self-defense is consistent with Christian meekness. Both natural law and Scripture justify it. The same God who tells us to put the sword away (Matthew 26:51) permits us to use a shield in our own defense. He who calls us to be innocent as doves — not harming others — also calls us to be wise as serpents in preserving ourselves.

Second caution: Although personal revenge is contrary to meekness, a magistrate may justly punish those who harm others — and this is not revenge but the administration of justice. The magistrate is God's representative on earth. God has placed the sword in his hand, and he is not to let it go unused. He must punish wrongdoers (1 Peter 2:14). A private person must not repay evil with evil (Romans 12:17), but a magistrate must — meeting the evil of offense with the penalty it deserves. This kind of rendering is good. Private citizens must sheathe the sword; but a magistrate sins if he does not draw it out. Just as the sword must not be drawn with cruelty, it must not rust from favoritism or indifference. Excessive leniency in a magistrate is not meekness — it is injustice. To indulge offenders with a gentle rebuke, as Eli did (1 Samuel 2:23-24), saying, "Why do you do such things? No, my sons, the report I hear is not good" — this is nothing more than shaving a head that deserves to be cut off. Such a magistrate makes himself guilty.

Fourth, meekness is opposed to abusive speech (Ephesians 4:31): "Let all... abusive speech... be put away from you." Our words should be gentle, like the waters of Siloam that flow quietly. It is far too common for hot-tempered people to erupt in harsh and insulting language. Many people's tongues are on fire, and it is the devil who lights the match. This is why Scripture says such tongues are set on fire by hell (James 3:6). People have learned from the ancient serpent to spit venom at one another through shameful insults. Matthew 5:22: "Whoever says to his brother, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell." Under that word 'fool,'

our Savior forbids all degrading terms. Let us take care in this. Such speech is hateful to God. God is not in this fire — He is in the still small voice (1 Kings 19:12).

Objection: But did not the Apostle Paul call the Galatians foolish (Galatians 3:1)?

Answer: Paul had an infallible spirit, which we do not. Beyond that, when Paul said those words, he was not insulting but correcting. His aim was not to slander the Galatians but to reclaim them — not to put them down but to humble them. Paul was grieved to see them relapsing so quickly. He was right to say, "You foolish Galatians" — he said it in holy zeal, because they had endured so much for the sake of the Gospel and were now falling away (verse 4): "Did you suffer so many things in vain?" But even though Paul, guided by the Spirit of God, used that word with the Galatians, it gives us no warrant to hurl insulting language at those who have wronged us. Meekness does not express itself in abuse. It does not retaliate with harsh words (Jude 9): "But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" Some interpret Michael here as a reference to Christ, but more accurately it refers to one of the chief angels. The dispute between the archangel and the devil was over the body of Moses. Some theologians suggest that when God prepared the burial of Moses, He charged the archangel to inter him so secretly that no one would know the location. This is likely because, had the body been found, the Israelites might have been tempted in misguided devotion to worship it. The devil opposed the archangel and contended over the dead body. Yet the archangel refused to respond with harsh accusation. It seems the

devil provoked him with angry words and tried to draw passion out of him, but the archangel remained calm and said only, "The Lord rebuke you." The archangel would not even rail against the devil. We can learn meekness from that example (1 Peter 3:9): "Not returning evil for evil or insult for insult."

This does not mean a Christian should never wisely defend himself against false accusations. When the Apostle Paul was charged with madness, he defended himself (Acts 26:25): "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus." A Christian's responses must not wound others, but they may vindicate himself. He may not slander another, but he may defend himself. Christian prudence must accompany Christian meekness. To surrender our integrity without a word is not mildness but weakness (Job 27:6). Staying silent when we are falsely accused makes us appear guilty. We must embrace meekness without sacrificing the honor of our innocence. It is lawful to defend our own name. The fault lies only when we respond to injury with insulting language — paying a person back in the devil's currency.

The second part of meekness is forgiving injuries. Mark 11:25: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive" — as if Christ is saying, there is little point in praying if you will not forgive. A meek spirit is a forgiving spirit. This is a hard thing — nothing runs more directly against the current of our fallen nature. People forget kindnesses but remember injuries. I once heard of a woman who had lived in deep hatred toward someone. When her neighbors urged her on her deathbed to forgive, she answered, "I cannot forgive, even if I go to hell for it." Forgiving cuts against the grain. Some people would sooner sacrifice their lives than let go of their grudges. But forgive we must — and forgive as God forgives.

First, God forgives genuinely. He does not merely make a show of forgiveness while still holding our sins against us. He blots out our debts (Isaiah 43:25). God passes an act of complete amnesty (Jeremiah 31:34) — He forgives and forgets. In the same way, a meek spirit does not merely put on a performance of forgiving a neighbor but does it from the heart (Matthew 18:35).

Second, God forgives completely. He does not reduce the debt by only part while keeping the rest on record. He grants full release (Psalm 103:3): "Who pardons all your iniquities." A meek-spirited Christian likewise forgives all injuries. Insincere hearts let go of some offenses but hold onto others — this is only half-forgiveness. Is that meekness? Is that how you want God to treat you? Would you want Him to forgive your sins the same way you forgive others?

Third, God forgives repeatedly. We sin constantly — every day we run up new debts — yet God forgives again and again. This is why He is said to multiply pardon (Isaiah 55:7). A meek spirit does the same, sending one pardon after another. Peter once asked (Matthew 18:21): "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Christ answered him (verse 22): "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

First objection: The offense I have suffered is so severe that no person could simply swallow it.

Answer: Flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50). Christians must go against their natural impulses and use the sword of the Spirit to fight against the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:24).

Second objection: But if I forgive one injury, I will only invite more.

First answer: To become worse because of someone's kindness reveals a diabolical character. But even if we do encounter such people, our duty remains to be ready to forgive (Colossians 3:13). Should we stop doing good just because others will not stop doing evil?

Second answer: If the more you forgive, the more injuries you receive, that only makes your grace shine more brightly. Another person's wickedness becomes a greater showcase for your virtue. Forgiving repeatedly adds weight to his sin and adds to the glory that awaits you. If someone says, "I want to grow in other graces, but meekness — bearing and forgiving injuries — is beyond me, and I ask to be excused from it" — what can be said of such a person's other graces? Where there is one true grace, all the graces are present. Without meekness, what you have is nothing but a counterfeit chain of virtues. Your faith is a fiction, your repentance a lie, your humility a pretense.

When you say you cannot forgive, consider two things. First, your sin. Your neighbor is not as bad in offending you as you are in refusing to forgive him. Your neighbor, in wronging you, sins against a man. But you, in refusing to forgive him, sin against God. Second, your danger. If you are implacable — if you smother the fire of your rage without extinguishing it — know this: if you were to die tonight, you would die in an unforgiven condition. If you will not take my word for it, take Christ's (Mark 11:26): "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions." He who lives without meekness dies without mercy.

Third, meekness reaches its highest form in returning good for evil — this is a higher degree than what came before. Matthew 5:44: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who mistreat you." Romans 12:20: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him." 1 Peter 3:9: "Not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead." This threefold cord of Scripture should not be easily dismissed. To return evil for evil is brutish. To return evil for good is devilish. To return good for evil is Christian. The ancient pagans held this maxim: wrong no one unless first provoked by injury. They thought it lawful to wrong people who had wronged them first. But the light of Scripture shines far brighter than the lamp of human reason. Love your enemies. When grace enters the heart, it produces a remarkable transformation. When a shoot is grafted onto a tree, it draws nourishment from the tree's roots and produces that tree's fruit. Take a wild crab-apple and graft it onto a good tree, and it will bear good fruit like that tree. In the same way, a person who was once sour and vengeful — once he draws nourishment from the heavenly olive — bears generous fruit. He is full of love toward his enemies. Grace calms the passion and melts the heart into compassion. Just as the sun draws up thick, harmful vapors from earth and sea and returns them as sweet rain, a gracious heart returns all the unkindness and hostility of its enemies with the gentle warmth of love. David did exactly this (Psalm 35:13): "They repaid me evil for good... but as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting." Others might have rejoiced — David wept. Others might have put on festive clothing — David put on sackcloth. This is the wonder — the near-miracle — of meekness: it returns good for evil. So we have seen what meekness truly is.

Showing the character of a true saint.

Use 1. This shows us the mark of a true saint: he has a meek and gracious spirit and is not easily provoked. He puts the best interpretation on things and overcomes malice with gentleness. I wish all who claim to be saints were adorned with this grace. We show that we belong to Christ when we wear His likeness. A true saint has a spirit so shaped by meekness that he can set aside prejudice and bury unkindnesses. A burst of tears is far more fitting for a Christian than a burst of anger. Every saint is Christ's bride (Song of Solomon 4:8). It is right for Christ's bride to be meek. If an injury is done to her, she leaves the avenging of it to her Husband. It is not fitting for Christ's bride to strike back.

An appeal for meekness.

Use 2. I urge all Christians to pursue this excellent grace of meekness wholeheartedly. Zephaniah 2:3: "Seek meekness." The word seek implies we have lost it and must make a diligent search to find it again. Colossians 3:12: "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of... meekness" — put it on like a garment and never take it off. Meekness is a necessary ingredient in everything we do. First, it is necessary in teaching others (2 Timothy 2:25): "With gentleness correcting those who are in opposition." Meekness wins over those who oppose the truth. It softens hearts, and gentle words have a softening effect. Second, meekness is necessary when hearing God's word (James 1:21): "Receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls" — receive it with meekness. Anyone who comes to the word with anger or prejudice gets not benefit from it but harm. He turns wine to poison and stabs himself with the very sword of the Spirit. Third, meekness is needed when correcting others (Galatians 6:1):

"If anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." The Greek word means to put someone back in joint. When a bone is dislocated, the surgeon must not use a rough hand — that might break another bone. He must work gently and then bind it carefully. In the same way, when a brother has fallen through carelessness, we must not come at him in a fury, but with meekness work to restore him. Let me offer several strong reasons for cultivating meekness.

First, consider examples of meekness.

First, the example of Jesus Christ. Matthew 21:5: "Behold, your King is coming to you, gentle." Christ was the supreme pattern and model of meekness. 1 Peter 2:23: "While being reviled, He did not revile in return." His enemies' words were more bitter than the gall they offered Him, yet Christ's words were gentler than oil. He prayed and wept for His enemies. He calls us to learn from Him (Matthew 11:29): "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart." Christ does not call us (says Augustine) to learn from Him how to work miracles, open blind eyes, or raise the dead — He calls us to learn from Him to be meek. If we do not follow His life, we cannot be saved by His death.

Second, consider the examples of some of the saints who excelled in this grace. Moses was a man of extraordinary meekness. Numbers 12:3: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." How many injuries he endured! When the people of Israel grumbled against him, instead of erupting in anger, he fell to his knees in prayer for them (Exodus 15:24-25). The text says they grumbled at the waters of Marah — but surely the bitterness of the people's spirits was worse than the bitterness of the water. Yet they could not provoke him to

anger, only to prayer. On another occasion, when the people had no water, they quarreled with Moses (Exodus 17:3): "Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" — as if saying, If we die here, the blame is on you. Would that not enrage a person? It would have taken the meekness of an angel to endure it. But see Moses's meekness — he did not answer them with a single harsh word. While they were in a storm of anger, he was in a calm. They quarreled; he prayed. David was another outstanding example of meekness. When Shimei cursed David, and Abishai, one of David's bodyguards, wanted to cut Shimei's head off, King David said, "Let him alone and let him curse" (2 Samuel 16:11). And when Saul had wronged and mistreated David, and David had the opportunity to kill Saul while he slept (1 Samuel 26:7, 12), David would not lay a hand on him, but called on God to be his judge (verse 23). Here was a mirror of meekness.

Third, consider examples from the ancient pagans. Their meekness could not properly be called grace, since it did not grow from the root of faith — yet it was admirable in its own way. Pericles, when a man insulted him and followed him all the way home to his gate at night with a stream of abuse, said nothing in reply but simply ordered a servant to light a torch and escort the man safely home. Frederick, Duke of Saxony, whenever he felt angry, would shut himself in his private room and allow no one near him until he had mastered his passion. Plutarch reports that the Pythagoreans had a rule: if they quarreled during the day, they would embrace and make peace before sunset. Cicero, in one of his speeches, reports that Pompey the Great was a man of a gentle disposition. He was so accessible to all who came to him, and so pa-

tient in hearing the complaints of the wronged, that he surpassed all the rulers before him. He had such a kind temperament that it was hard to say whether his enemies feared his courage more or his subjects loved his gentleness more. Julius Caesar not only forgave his enemies Brutus and Cassius but promoted them. He considered acts of clemency and meekness his greatest honors. If natural character could rise to this level, should not grace rise higher? Should we allow faith to fall below mere reason? Let us copy these admirable examples.

Second, meekness is a great beauty on a Christian (1 Peter 3:4): "The ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit." How lovely a saint appears in God's eyes when adorned with this jewel! What the psalmist says of praise, I may say of meekness — it is fitting for the righteous. No garment suits a Christian better than meekness, which is why we are told to put it on (Colossians 3:12): "Put on a heart of... humility, gentleness." A meek spirit gives credit to the Christian faith and silences critics. It is the finish that brings out the beauty of holiness and presents the Gospel in its best light.

Third, meekness is the way to become like God. God Himself is meek toward those who provoke Him. How many foul mouths are opened every day against the Majesty of heaven? How people tear at His name, grieve His Spirit, and crucify His Son afresh! They walk about the earth like demons wrapped in flesh — yet the Lord is meek, not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). How easily God could crush sinners and cast them into hell! Yet He restrains His anger. Though He is full of majesty, He is also full of meekness. In God are joined princely greatness and fatherly gentleness — His scepter of royalty alongside His throne of grace. How this should make us fall in love with meekness! Through meekness

we come to bear a likeness to God. It is not our profession that makes us like God — it is our imitation of Him. Where meekness is absent, we fall below humanity. Where it is present, we bear a resemblance to God.

Fourth, meekness reflects a noble and excellent spirit. A meek person is a courageous person — he gains victory over himself. Anger and irritability arise from weakness and lack of self-control. This is why old people and children are often more easily provoked than others. Intense passion signals weakness of judgment. But the meek person who can conquer his own fury is the most powerful and victorious of all. Proverbs 16:32: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city." Giving in to passion is easy — it is simply floating along with the current of fallen nature. But to turn against that current, to resist passion, to overcome evil with good — that is true Christian character. This is the kind of spiritual courage and strength of mind that deserves the highest praise.

Fifth, meekness is the most effective way to conquer and soften an enemy's heart. When Saul lay completely at David's mercy and David only cut off the edge of his robe, how Saul's heart was moved by David's meekness (1 Samuel 24:16-17)! "Is this your voice, my son David?" And Saul wept aloud and said to David, "You are more righteous than I, for you have dealt well with me, while I have dealt wickedly with you. When the Lord had delivered me into your hand, you did not kill me." This act of returning kindness for injury melted and softened his enemy's heart. The greatest victory is to overcome an enemy without striking a single blow. Fire goes where a wedge cannot. Gentleness achieves more than force. Anger turns friends into enemies; meekness turns enemies into friends.

The meek Christian may find even his opponents speaking well of him. It is reported of Philip, King of Macedon, that when he was told Nicanor was openly insulting him, the king, instead of having him executed as his advisors urged, sent Nicanor a generous gift. This so won the man over that he went about retracting everything he had said against the king and began to praise the king's kindness publicly. Harshness hardens people's hearts. Meekness causes them to soften. 2 Kings 6:22-23 shows that when the king of Israel treated his prisoners of war with hospitality, they were more completely conquered by his meekness than by his sword. The raiding bands of Syria stopped coming into the land of Israel.

Sixth, consider the great promise in the text: the meek shall inherit the earth. This argument may carry weight with those who desire earthly security. Some might object: If I show restraint and forgive, I will lose what is mine and end up with nothing. But God has given His word here: the meek shall inherit the earth. The un-meek person is in a desperate situation. No promise is made to him for either earth or heaven — the only place left is hell. It is the meek who shall inherit the earth.

Objection: How do the meek inherit the earth when they are strangers and wanderers on it (Hebrews 11:37)?

Answer: The meek are said to inherit the earth not because the earth is their greatest inheritance, or because they always possess the largest share of it — but for the following reasons.

First, the meek are inheritors of the earth because, though they may not always hold the largest portion of it, they hold the best title to it. The word 'inherit,' says Ambrose, points to the saints' legal claim to the earth. The saints have the strongest claim, being

members of Christ, who is Lord of all. When Adam fell, he lost not only his title to heaven but to the earth as well. It is only by being united to Christ that we fully recover that title. I do not deny that the wicked have a civil right to property established by human law — but they have no sacred right. Only the meek Christian holds a scriptural title to his land. The strongest title is the one held through the head of the estate. The saints hold their right to the earth through their Head, Christ, who is the ruler of the kings of the earth (Revelation 1:5). In this sense, a person who owns only a small plot of land inherits more than one who owns thousands of acres, because his right to it is firmer and more secure.

Second, the meek Christian is said to inherit the earth because he inherits the blessing of the earth. The wicked man has earthly possessions, but not as a gift of God's favor. He has them the way a dog has poisoned bread — they do him more harm than good. A wicked person lives in the world like someone breathing infected air — his very blessings infect him. The richness of the earth will only make his torment fiercer in hell. In that sense, a wicked man can be said not to truly have what he has, because he lacks the blessing that goes with it. But the meek saint enjoys the earth as a token of God's love. The curse and poison have been removed from it for him. Psalm 37:11: "But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity." On this verse Augustine comments: wicked men may delight in an abundance of livestock and wealth, but the meek person delights in an abundance of peace. Whatever he has, he possesses with inward calm and contentment.

A caution: when it is said the meek shall inherit the earth, this does not mean the earth is all they will inherit — they will inherit heaven as well. If they were to receive only the earth, then (says Chrysostom) how could this be called a blessing? The earth is only the meek person's temporary dwelling. Heaven is their permanent home. Psalm 149:4: "He will beautify the humble with salvation." The meek bring beauty to the Christian faith, and God will adorn them with salvation. Salvation is the destination we all long to reach — it is the full harvest of the soul. The meek are those who will reap this harvest. They will wear the garment of salvation. The meek are lords of the earth and heirs of salvation (Hebrews 1:14).

Seventh, consider the harm that comes from an unmeek spirit. First, nothing opens the door of the heart to the devil and invites his possession more than wrath and anger (Ephesians 4:26-27): "Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity." When people give free rein to passion, they let Satan in. The wrathful person has the devil for a companion. Second, passion destroys inner peace. The meek Christian has a deep quiet and harmony in his soul. But passion throws the soul into disorder — it not only clouds reason but disturbs the conscience. A person ruled by passion does not possess himself. It is no wonder those who care so little about keeping peace have no peace of conscience. Anger grieves the Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30-31), and when the Spirit is grieved, He withdraws. We do not like to stay in smoke-filled rooms. The Spirit of God does not choose to dwell in a heart filled with the fumes of disordered passion.

Eighth, another reason to cool the heat of our hearts is this: all the injuries and unkind treatment we receive from the world do not happen by chance — they are ordered by an all-wise God for our good. Many people are like a foolish dog that snaps at the stone thrown at it, never looking at the hand that threw it — or like a horse that, when spurred by its rider, bites the bridle. If we looked higher than the people who wrong us, our hearts would grow calm and meek. David looked past Shimei's rage (2 Samuel 16:11): "Let him curse, for the Lord has told him to." How wise it would be for Christians to see the hand of God in all the rudeness and unkindness that people show them! Job kept his eyes on God in his suffering, and that made his spirit meek (Job 1:21): "The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." He did not say, "The Chaldeans have taken away" — he said, "The Lord has taken away." What kept Christ so meek in His suffering? He did not fix His eyes on Judas or Pilate — He looked to His Father (John 18:11): "The cup which the Father has given Me." When wicked people insult and harm us, they are only instruments in God's hand. Who is angry at an instrument?

God has a hand in all the offenses and discourtesies we receive from people — they are only passing on what God permits. And God will turn all of it to our good, if we belong to Him. David said (2 Samuel 16:12): "Perhaps the Lord will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing today." Often, when God intends to give us some extraordinary blessing, He first prepares us through some significant trial. Just as Moses's hand was leprous before it worked deliverance (Exodus 4:6), God may allow His peo-

ple to be struck by the curses and insults of others before showering some great blessing on them. Perhaps the Lord will return good to me for this cursing today.

Ninth, a lack of meekness reveals a lack of grace. True grace increases love and moderates anger. Grace is like a file that smooths rough iron — it removes the roughness from a person's spirit. Grace says to the heart what Christ said to the angry sea (Mark 4:39): "Hush, be still." Where grace lives in the heart, it quiets the storm of passion and produces calm. A person in a constant state of rage, giving free rein to wrath and malice, has never yet experienced the true power of grace. Implacability is listed as one of the sins of the pagans (Romans 1:31). A vengeful, bitter heart is not only pagan but diabolical (James 3:14-15): "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart... this wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is... demonic." The ancient serpent spits forth the poison of malice and revenge.

Tenth, if everything said so far is not enough to break this raging, out-of-control temper — then hear this: you are the kind of person God describes as refusing correction. You are in rebellion against His word. Read this and tremble (Isaiah 30:8-9): "Now go, inscribe it on a tablet before them and write it on a scroll, that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever. For this is a rebellious people, false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord." If nothing will calm this wrathful spirit, be aware that God has warned everyone to stay away from you (Proverbs 22:24): "Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man." What a state to be in — that everyone is warned to keep their distance, as someone unfit for human company! Make no friendship with that person, says God. Bring him

into your circle, and you have taken a snake to your chest. "With a hot-tempered man you shall not go." Would you walk with the devil? The furious person is possessed by a spirit of wrath.

May all of this help to soften and sweeten the spirits of Christians.

Objection: But it is my natural temperament to be passionate.

First answer: This reasoning is sinful. It secretly places the blame for your sin on God. We learned this from Adam (Genesis 3:12): "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." Rather than admit his sin, Adam shifted the blame onto God — "the woman You gave me." He was essentially saying: If You had not given me this woman, I would not have eaten. Someone today says the same: It is my nature — this difficult, irritable temperament is the nature God gave me. But you are falsely accusing God. God gave you no such nature. He made human beings upright (Ecclesiastes 7:29). God made you straight. You made yourself crooked. At the beginning, all your emotions — joy, love, anger — were properly ordered, like stars in their correct orbits. But you displaced them and made them run out of course. At first, the emotions were like well-tuned instruments playing in harmony. Sin was the note that threw everything out of tune. Do not pretend that anger is simply your nature. You have only yourself to thank for it. The spring of our nature was pure until sin poisoned it.

Second answer: Is it truly your nature to be fierce and angry? Far from excusing you, that only makes things worse. It is a toad's nature to be poisonous — that is exactly what makes it so repulsive. If a man were brought before a judge for theft and said, "Have

mercy on me — it is my nature to steal" — would that be any defense? The judge would say, then you deserve to die even more. Sinner, you need a new nature. Flesh and blood cannot enter the kingdom of God.

How to attain the grace of meekness.

Question: How can I come to possess this excellent grace of meekness?

First answer: Frequently meditate on the meekness of Christ. A student who wants to write well keeps his eyes on the model he is copying.

Second answer: Pray earnestly that God will make your spirit meek. God is called the God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10). Every grace is His to give — so ask Him for this grace of meekness. If one person held the rights to every piece of land in the country, people would petition him for a piece to live on. God holds the rights to all the graces. Let us petition Him. Mercy comes in through the door of prayer. Ezekiel 36:26, 37: "I will also let the house of Israel ask Me to do this for them." Meekness is what we need. Let us send prayer as our agent to heaven to obtain it. And pray in faith — when faith sets prayer in motion, prayer moves God to act. All divine blessings flow to us through the golden channel of prayer.

CHAPTER 13



Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

Describing the nature of spiritual hunger.

We come now to the fourth step of blessedness: blessed are those who hunger. The verse contains two main parts.

First, a duty implied: blessed are those who hunger. Spiritual hunger is a blessed hunger.

Question 1: What is meant by hunger?

Answer: Hunger stands for deep desire (Isaiah 26:9). Spiritual hunger is the soul's longing for what it senses it most deeply needs.

Question 2: Where does this hunger come from?

Answer: Hunger comes from a sense of need. The person who hungers spiritually has a real awareness of his own poverty — he knows he lacks righteousness.

Question 3: What is meant by righteousness?

Answer: There are two kinds of righteousness.

First, righteousness by imputation. Second, righteousness by implantation.

First, righteousness by imputation — that is, Christ's righteousness. Jeremiah 23:6: "He will be called, 'The Lord our righteousness.'" This righteousness is as truly ours to receive for justification as it is Christ's to give. Because of this righteousness, God looks on us as though we had never sinned (Numbers 23:21). It is a perfect righteousness (Colossians 2:10): "You have been made complete in Him." This righteousness does not merely cover us — it adorns us. The person who has this righteousness stands equal with the most celebrated saints. The weakest believer is just as fully justified as the strongest. This is the Christian's great comfort: even when he is defiled within himself, he is spotless in his Head. Clothed in this righteousness, we shine more brightly than the angels. This righteousness is well worth hungering for.

Second, righteousness by implantation — that is, the righteousness worked within us: the graces of the Spirit, holiness of heart and life, which Cajetan calls universal righteousness. This is what a devout soul also hungers after.

This is a blessed hunger. Physical hunger cannot make a person as miserable as spiritual hunger makes him blessed. Spiritual hunger is evidence of life. A dead person cannot hunger — hunger is a sign of life. The first thing a newborn child does is hunger for the breast. In the same way, spiritual hunger follows the new birth (1 Peter 2:2). Bernard, in one of his reflections, comforts himself with this thought: that he must truly have grace within him, because he had a strong and persistent longing for God. It is a great blessing when, though we do not yet have what we ought to have, we desire what we lack. The spiritual appetite itself is as much a gift from God as the food that satisfies it.

What can be drawn from this truth.

Use 1. Notice how low a price God sets on heavenly things. The requirement is simply to hunger and thirst. Isaiah 55:1: "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat." We are not asked to bring merit, as the Roman Catholics teach, nor to bring money to purchase righteousness. All that is required is an appetite. Christ has fulfilled all righteousness. Our part is simply to hunger and thirst after it. This is entirely reasonable and fair. God does not demand rivers of oil — He asks for sighs and tears. The invitation of the Gospel is free. When a friend invites guests to his table, he does not expect them to pay for their meal. He only asks that they come with an appetite. God says the same: I am not asking for penance, pilgrimage, or self-made righteousness. Just come with a hunger — thirst after righteousness. God could have set a far higher price on Christ and salvation, but He has brought the price down low. This shows the kindness of God's nature — He is no harsh taskmaster. But it also shows how inexcusable those are who perish under the Gospel. What defense will any person have on the day of judgment when God asks: Why did you not come to Christ? I made Christ and grace available at the lowest price. If you had simply hungered for righteousness, you could have had it — but you rejected Christ. You thought so little of righteousness that you would not even desire it. How will you escape, having neglected so great a salvation? The easier the terms of the Gospel, the greater the punishment deserved by those who carelessly refuse such an offer.

Second, this shows us a true mark of a godly person — he hungers and thirsts after spiritual things. Isaiah 26:9; Psalm 73:25. A true saint is carried along on wings of desire. It is the very nature of a gracious soul to thirst after God. Psalm 42:2. When hearing

God's word preached, his soul is full of longing. He prays: Lord, You have brought me into Your courts — let me have Your presence, let Your glory fill this place! This is where You shape Your people — will You imprint on my soul the likeness of my dear Savior, transforming me more and more into His image? In prayer, how the soul fills with burning longing for Christ! Prayer itself is expressed as groans too deep for words (Romans 8:26). The heart sends whole volleys of sighs heavenward: Lord, one ray of Your love, one drop of Your blood!

A reproof for those who do not hunger after righteousness.

Use 2. This rebukes those who have none of this spiritual hunger — no deep desires, no passion for God, their appetite for Him entirely dulled. Honey is not sweet to a person sick with fever whose tongue is bitter with bile. Those who are soul-sick and living in spiritual bitterness find nothing sweet in God or in religion. Sin tastes sweeter to them. They have no spiritual hunger. That people lack this hunger for righteousness is evident from seven signs.

First, they have never felt any emptiness — they are full of their own righteousness (Romans 10:3). A full stomach has no appetite for even the finest food. This was Laodicea's condition — she was self-satisfied and had no appetite for Christ's gold or eye salve (Revelation 3:17). When people are filled with pride, this bloated condition kills holy longing — the way a stomach full of air kills the appetite for real food. No one is so empty of grace as those who think they are full. The person who needs righteousness most is usually the one who feels the least need for it.

Second, that people do not hunger for righteousness is evident because they manage perfectly well without it. As long as there is oil in the jar and the world keeps going, they are content. Grace is the one thing whose absence is least noticed. You hear people complain about poor health or a failing business, but you never hear them complain that they lack righteousness. Miss a meal or two and a person feels half ruined — yet these same people stay away from the means of grace, which are the channels through which righteousness flows. Do they hunger for righteousness, those who are satisfied without it? And who ask to be excused from feeding at the Gospel banquet? A person with no appetite is the one who begs to be excused from eating (Luke 14:18).

Third, a sign of no spiritual hunger is preferring sleep over food — being more drowsy than hungry. There are those who come to hear the word only to doze off, to whom one might say what Christ said to Peter (Mark 14:37): "Could you not keep watch for one hour?" It is a strange thing to see a man fall asleep at a meal. Others are sunk into a deeper sleep — the sleep of spiritual carelessness — and they actively resist a ministry that would awaken their souls. While they sleep, their condemnation is not sleeping (1 Peter 2:3).

Fourth, a sign that people have no spiritual hunger is that they push away their food. Christ and grace are offered — pressed upon them — yet they turn salvation away, like a stubborn child pushing away the breast (Psalm 81:11; Acts 13:46). This is true of enthusiasts who reject the appointed means of grace and claim instead to live by private revelations. But it is a strange kind of revelation that

tells a man he can live without food. These people choose husks over manna and feed on empty notions, sustained by the prince of the air.

Fifth, a sign of no spiritual hunger is caring more about how the dish is decorated than about the food itself. These are people who care more about elegance and novelty in preaching than about solid truth. It reflects either a spoiled palate or an overfed stomach to pick at garnishes and trifles while ignoring wholesome food. 1 Timothy 6:3-4: "If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words... he is conceited and understands nothing." The plainest truth has its own beauty. Those who only want to delight their imagination have no real spiritual hunger. The prophet described such people (Ezekiel 33:32): "You are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument." If a man were invited to a feast and there was music playing, and he was so absorbed in the music that he barely touched his food — you would say he clearly is not hungry. When people seek clever wordplay and prefer polished style over spiritual substance, it is a clear sign they have overfed stomachs and itching ears.

Sixth, those who consistently prefer other things over righteousness — their business, their leisure — show little hunger for it. If a boy who should be at dinner is out playing in the street, it is clear he has no appetite. If he were hungry, he would not choose play over food. In the same way, when people prefer empty pursuits to the blood of Christ and the grace of the Spirit, it is a sign they have no taste or appetite for heavenly things.

Seventh, a sign of no spiritual hunger is caring more about religious debates than about putting faith into practice. Robert Gallus once dreamed of a great feast where some of the guests were gnawing on hard stones. When people feed only on hard theological questions and endless controversies — the kind of distinctions some scholars endlessly argue, such as whether one may have fellowship with someone who lacks the work of grace, whether one must separate from a church over poor administration, or what to think of infant baptism, and so on — when these fine points crowd out faith and holiness, people are chewing bones instead of eating meat. Skeptics in religion have heated minds but cold hearts. If people truly hungered for righteousness, they would ask themselves questions like: How can I be saved? How can I confirm my calling and election? How can I put sin to death? But those who waste their time in fruitless and argumentative disputes — I say plainly — are strangers to this text. They do not hunger and thirst after righteousness.

A reproof for those who hunger, but not after righteousness.

Second, this rebukes those who, instead of hungering for righteousness, thirst after wealth. This is the thirst of the greedy — they want money, not manna. Amos 2:7: "They pant after the very dust of the earth." This is the disease most people suffer from — an excessive craving for worldly things. But wealth will no more satisfy the soul than a drink of water satisfies someone with dropsy. Greed is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Too many Protestants have set up the idol of gold in the temple of their hearts. The sin of greed is among the hardest to uproot. Typically, when other sins leave a person, this one stays. Lust tends to be the sin of youth; love of money tends to be the sin of old age.

Third, this rebukes those who hunger and thirst after unrighteousness. Three kinds of people fall under this charge.

First, it rebukes those who thirst after other people's land and possessions — which Scripture calls a grievous sin (Amos 5:12). Ahab was a prime example, thirsting after Naboth's vineyard. We live in a hungry age. There is no shortage of this kind of craving, which has produced many who steal through positions of power. People have stripped others bare to enrich themselves. What a bold challenge Samuel made before all Israel (1 Samuel 12:3): "Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed, or from whose hand have I taken a bribe?" Few who have held power can say the same. Wealth gained by plunder rarely lasts to the third generation. Read the plunderer's curse (Isaiah 33:1): "Woe to you, O destroyer... when you cease to destroy, you will be destroyed." Ahab paid dearly for that vineyard when the devil carried his soul away and dogs licked up his blood (1 Kings 21:19). He who builds his wealth on injustice ends a fool (Jeremiah 17:11): "He who makes a fortune, but unjustly, in the midst of his days it will forsake him."

Second, it rebukes those who hunger and thirst for revenge — a diabolical thirst. Though it would be more Christian and far safer to absorb an injury quietly, our fallen nature is prone to this craving for revenge. We have the bee's sting but not its honey. Malice, once it breaks past reason's restraint, turns savage. Even pagans have at times put Christians to shame in curbing the impulse for revenge when it began to rise. I have read of Phocion, who was unjustly condemned to death and asked his son not to remember the wrongs the Athenians had done him, nor to avenge his blood.

Third, it rebukes those who hunger and thirst to satisfy their sinful desires. Sinners are said to pursue sin with greediness (Ephesians 4:19). Amnon was lovesick until he had violated Tamar's purity. No hungry man comes to food with more eagerness than a wicked person comes to his sin. When Satan sees a person with such an appetite, he is quick to serve the dish they crave — he sets the forbidden fruit before them. Those who thirst to commit sin will one day thirst as Lazarus did in hell — for a single drop of water to cool their tongue.

Signs of genuine spiritual hunger.

Use 3. Let us examine ourselves: do we truly hunger and thirst after righteousness? Here are five signs by which you can test this hunger.

First, hunger is painful. Esau returned from hunting nearly dying of hunger (Genesis 25:32). Psalm 107:5: "They were hungry and thirsty; their soul fainted within them." In the same way, a person who hungers for righteousness is in real anguish of soul — almost faint with the longing. He feels the absence of Christ and grace deeply, and he is in distress until that spiritual hunger is satisfied.

Second, hunger is satisfied by nothing but food. Bring a hungry man flowers, play him music, tell him entertaining stories — nothing will content him but food. "Will You let me die of thirst?" cried Samson (Judges 15:18). In the same way, the person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness says: Give me Christ, or I die. Lord, what does anything matter if I have no Christ? What good are gifts, wealth, honor, and the world's approval? It is all nothing without Christ. Show me the Lord, and that is enough. Give me Christ to

clothe me, Christ to feed me, Christ to intercede for me. While the soul lacks Christ, it finds no rest. Nothing but the living water of Christ's blood can quench its thirst.

Third, hunger pushes through difficulty and goes out in search of food. As the saying goes, hunger breaks through stone walls (Genesis 42:1-2). The soul that hungers spiritually is resolved: it must have Christ, it must have grace. As Basil put it, the hungry soul is almost beside itself until it receives what it longs for.

Fourth, a hungry person sits down to eat with a real appetite — no one needs to coax him. In the same way, a person who hungers for righteousness feeds eagerly on the means of grace. Jeremiah 15:16: "Your words were found and I ate them." At the Lord's Supper, he feeds with genuine hunger on the body and blood of Christ. God delights to see us feed hungrily on the bread of life.

Fifth, a hungry person actually tastes the sweetness of food. In the same way, the person who hungers after righteousness finds real delight in heavenly things. To him, Christ is all richness — the very essence of all pleasure. 1 Peter 2:3: "If you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." The one who truly hungers finds the promises sweet. He can even taste sweetness in a reproof. To the hungry, even bitter things are pleasant (Proverbs 27:7). A sharp reproof becomes something sweet. He can feed on the myrrh of the Gospel as well as the honey. By these signs we can judge whether we truly hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Comfort for those who do hunger — and the difference between true and false hunger.

Use 4. This truth brings comfort to those who do hunger and thirst after righteousness. I have no doubt that many a sincere heart is grieved that it cannot be holier, cannot serve God better. Blessed are those who hunger. Even if you do not have as much righteousness as you desire, you are blessed — because you hunger for it. Desire is the clearest evidence of genuine Christian life. Actions can be faked. A person can perform a good deed for a bad reason, as Jehu did. Actions can also be forced. A person may be compelled to do what is right but cannot be forced to want it. This is why we should treasure our holy desires and thank God for them. Often a child of God has nothing else to show before God but his longings (Nehemiah 1:11): "Your servants who delight to revere Your name." These hungers after righteousness arise from love. A person does not desire what he does not love. If you did not love Christ, you could not hunger for Him.

Objection 1: If my hunger were genuine, I could take comfort in it — but I fear it is counterfeit. Even hypocrites have their desires.

Answer: To better settle a doubting Christian, let me show the difference between true and false desire — between spiritual hunger and merely natural longing.

First, the hypocrite does not desire grace for its own sake. He desires grace only as a bridge to carry him over to heaven. He does not truly thirst for grace so much as for glory. He desires not the way of righteousness so much as the crown of righteousness. His desire is not to become like Christ but to reign with Christ. This was Balaam's desire (Numbers 23:10): "Let me die the death of the upright." Desires like these are found even among the damned.

This is the hypocrite's version of hunger. But a child of God desires grace for itself and Christ for Himself. To a true believer, not only is heaven precious — Christ Himself is precious (1 Peter 2:7).

Second, the hypocrite's desire is conditional. He wants heaven and his sins too — heaven and his pride, heaven and his greed. The young man in the Gospel would have had heaven, provided he could keep his wealth. Many want Christ but cling to some sin they refuse to give up. This is the hypocrite's hunger. But true desire is unconditional. The soul says: Give me Christ on any terms. Let God set whatever conditions He will — I will agree to them. Does He require self-denial? Does He require putting sin to death? I am willing to do whatever it takes, as long as I have Christ. Hypocrites want Christ but are unwilling to give up a single sin for Him — like someone who wants a lease but refuses to pay the fee.

Third, hypocrites' desires are bare wishes — lazy and sluggish, nothing more. When someone urged Lipsius to pursue virtue, he said, "My mind is inclined to it." Proverbs 21:25: "The desire of the lazy man puts him to death, for his hands refuse to work." Many are like the man in the fable who stood beside his wagon stuck in the mud, crying out "Help, Hercules!" — when he should have put his own shoulder to the wheel. People want to be saved but will put in no effort. Does a man truly want water if he will not lower the bucket into the well? But genuine desire moves a person to action. Isaiah 26:9: "At night my soul longs for You, indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently." It is the forceful who take heaven by force (Matthew 11:12). The lovesick bride in the Song of Songs, though wounded and stripped of her veil, still presses after Christ (Song of Solomon 5:7). Desire is the weight of the soul that sets it in motion. As the eagle that spots its prey swoops toward it with-

out delay (Job 39:29) — sharp-eyed to spot it, swift-winged to reach it — so the soul that hungers for righteousness rushes toward it through every holy means of grace.

Fourth, the hypocrite's desires are cheap — he wants spiritual things but is unwilling to pay any cost for them. He has no trouble spending money on sinful pleasures or a night with drinking companions, but he resists giving anything for the support of God's work. Hypocrites talk up religion but talk down the financial support of ministers. But genuine desires are costly. David refused to offer burnt offerings that cost him nothing (1 Chronicles 21:24). A truly hungry man will give everything he has for food, as happened during the siege of Samaria (2 Kings 6:25). A person who grudges spending a little money on the pearl of great price has never truly hungered for Christ.

Fifth, the hypocrite's desires are intense but short-lived — quickly gone, like a gust of wind that does not stay, or a fever that soon breaks. When the hypocrite is under fear of judgment or in the middle of suffering, he feels some good desires — but the fever soon passes. His goodness, like a bright comet, quickly burns itself out. But true desire is steady. It is worth noting that the Greek word in this verse is a present participle: blessed are those who are hungering. Even those who already have righteousness are still hungering for more. The hypocrite's desire is like a watch that soon runs down. The godly person's desire is like a steady heartbeat — it lasts as long as life itself (Psalm 119:20): "My soul is crushed with longing after Your ordinances at all times." To make clear that this longing was no passing mood, the psalmist adds: at all times. David's desire for God was not a temporary flush of emotion — it was the constant state of his soul. In the tabernacle the al-

tar fire was never allowed to go out (Leviticus 6:13): "Fire shall be kept burning continually on the altar." There was, says Cyril, a mystery in this — to show that we must always be burning with holy longing and desire.

Sixth, the hypocrite's desires are poorly timed — they come too late. He postpones his hunger for righteousness until it is too late. He is like the foolish virgins who came knocking after the door was shut (Matthew 25:10). During health and prosperity, his affections ran in a different direction entirely — it was sin he craved, not righteousness. When he is dying and can hold onto his sins no longer, now he wants grace as a travel pass to heaven. This is the hypocrite's problem: his faith came too early and his desires came too late. He said he believed from childhood — ever since he could remember — but his real longing for Christ doesn't emerge until the final evening of old age. He sends out his desires with his dying breath, like a man asking for a pardon after the sentence has already been carried out. Deathbed desires like these are suspect. But genuine desire is timely — a gracious heart seeks God's kingdom first (Matthew 6:33). David's thirst for God was early in the day (Psalm 63:1). The wise virgins obtained their oil before the bridegroom arrived. So we have seen the difference between true and false hunger. Those who find genuine hunger within themselves are blessed and may take real comfort in it.

Objection 2: But my hunger for righteousness is so weak that I am afraid it is not genuine.

First answer: A faint pulse still shows that life is present. So that weak desires would not be discouraged, there is a promise made to them (Matthew 12:20): "A bruised reed He will not break." A reed is already a fragile thing — when it is bruised, even

more so. Yet this bruised reed will not be snapped off. Like Aaron's dry rod, it will bud and bloom. When you feel weak, look to Christ your high priest — He is merciful, so He will bear with your frailties; He is mighty, so He will strengthen them.

Second answer: When your desires feel weak and faint, a Christian can also gauge his spiritual health by his settled convictions, not just his feelings. What do you value most in your considered judgment? Is it Christ and grace? That is strong evidence of a real claim on heaven. Paul showed the depth of his love for Christ by the value he placed on Him — counting everything else as rubbish compared to gaining Christ (Philippians 3:8).

Objection 3: A child of God says: What troubles my comfort most is that I do not have the hunger I once had. There was a time when I longed for the Lord's Day, because that was when the manna fell — I called it a delight. I remember when I hungered for the body and blood of the Lord. I came to the Lord's Supper the way a starving man comes to a banquet. But it is not the same now. The old hunger is gone.

Answer: It is indeed a bad sign to lose one's spiritual appetite. But while a fading appetite is a sign of declining grace, grieving over that loss is a sign of genuine grace. It is sorrowful to lose your first love — but it is a good sign when you mourn the loss of it.

Second answer: Even if your appetite for heavenly things is not what it once was, do not give up — through the faithful use of the means of grace, the appetite can return. The ordinances of God are precisely for recovering a lost appetite. In ordinary life, eating too much deadens the appetite. But in the spiritual life, feeding on the word and sacraments actually creates more appetite.

An appeal to pursue spiritual hunger.

Use 5. This calls all of us to pursue spiritual hunger. Hunger less for the world, and more for righteousness. Say of spiritual things: Lord, give me this bread always — feed me with this food of angels. The manna most worth hungering after is what not only sustains life but prevents death (John 6:50). What is most enduring is most worth desiring. Riches do not last (Proverbs 27:24), but righteousness lasts forever (Proverbs 8:18). The beauty of holiness never fades. The robe of righteousness never wears out. Hunger after the righteousness that delivers from death (Proverbs 10:2). This is the righteousness that God Himself loves (Proverbs 15:9): "He loves one who pursues righteousness." Everyone wants the favor of a king — but what is a prince's smile but a fleeting pleasure? His royal approval can quickly cloud over into displeasure. But you who are clothed in righteousness are God's beloved — and how precious is His smile (Psalm 63:3): "Your lovingkindness is better than life."

Stirring up spiritual hunger.

To move people toward hungering for this righteousness, consider two things.

First, without hungering for righteousness, we cannot obtain it. God will never give His blessings to those who have no desire for them. If a king says to a rebel, Simply ask for a pardon and you will have it — and the rebel, out of pride and stubbornness, refuses to ask — he justly deserves to die. God has made spiritual blessings available at the lowest possible cost: simply hunger, and you will

have righteousness. But if we refuse even this, there is no righteousness to be had. God will dam up the river of mercy and open the floodgate of His judgment.

Second, if we do not thirst now, we will thirst when it is too late. If we do not thirst as David did (Psalm 42:2): "My soul thirsts for God" — we will thirst as the rich man did in hell for a single drop of water (Luke 16:24). Those who do not thirst for righteousness now will be in an unending state of hunger and thirst later. They will cry for mercy, but there will be none to be had. Heat increases thirst. When people burn in hell under the flames of God's wrath, the heat will intensify their craving for mercy — and there will be nothing to relieve it. Is it not better to thirst for righteousness while it can still be obtained, than to thirst for mercy when there is none left? Sinners, the time is coming quickly when the drawbridge of mercy will be pulled up permanently.

Let me briefly offer some practical helps for developing spiritual hunger.

First, avoid the things that kill your spiritual appetite. Air in the stomach: when the stomach is bloated with gas, there is no appetite for food. In the same way, when a person is puffed up with a high opinion of his own righteousness, he will have no hunger for Christ's righteousness. A person who thinks he already has enough grace will not hunger for more. These bloated spiritual opinions kill the appetite. Second, sweets also destroy appetite. When we feed excessively on the rich pleasures of the world, we lose our hunger for Christ and grace. No one was ever so full of worldly pleasure that he became lovesick for Christ. While Israel feasted on the garlic and onions of Egypt, they had no craving for manna. The soul cannot be pulled in two opposite directions at once. Just as

the eye cannot look intently at heaven and earth at the same moment, a person cannot at the same time hunger excessively for the world and for righteousness. Earth puts out fire. Love of worldly things will quench the desire for spiritual things (1 John 2:15). Do not love the world. The sin is not in having it but in loving it.

Second, do whatever will stimulate your spiritual appetite. Two things in ordinary life build appetite. First, exercise. A person who walks and moves around builds up an appetite for a meal. In the same way, the exercise of holy duties increases the spiritual appetite (1 Timothy 4:7): "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." Many people have given up private prayer, rarely hear the word, and through lack of spiritual exercise have lost their appetite for God.

Second, a sharp sauce — a good sauce whets and sharpens the appetite. Two things serve as this sharpening sauce for the spiritual appetite. First, the bitter herbs of repentance. The person who has truly tasted the gall and vinegar of sin hungers for the body and blood of the Lord. Second, affliction. God often sends this sharp sauce to whet our hunger for grace. Reuben found mandrakes in the field (Genesis 30:14). The mandrake plant has a very strong fragrance and was especially prized as a remedy for weak stomachs. Afflictions can be compared to these mandrakes — they sharpen a person's hunger for spiritual nourishment that had grown stale during times of ease. Need is the sauce that cures the sickness of too much plenty. In sickness people hunger for righteousness more than they do in health. The full stomach has no appetite for the finest food. When Christians are well-fed and comfortable, they tend to neglect the rich comfort of the Gospel. I fear we may be taking lightly today the truths that would taste sweet in

a prison cell. How precious a single page of the Bible was in the days of Queen Mary! In His wisdom, God sometimes provides the sharp sauce of affliction to make us feed more hungrily on the bread of life. And so much for the first part of this verse: Blessed are those who hunger.

CHAPTER 14



Matthew 5:6: "For they shall be filled."
Showing that spiritual hunger will be satisfied.

I turn now to the second part of the verse, which contains a promise: they shall be filled. A Christian's battle with sin is not like a man swinging at air (1 Corinthians 9:26), and his hunger for righteousness is not like breathing in empty air. Blessed are those who hunger, for they shall be filled.

Those who hunger for righteousness will be filled. God never tells us to seek Him in vain. Here is a honeycomb dropping into the mouths of the hungry: they shall be filled. Luke 1:53: "He has filled the hungry with good things." Psalm 107:9: "He has satisfied the thirsty soul." God will not allow our longing to go unanswered. This shows one great advantage righteousness has over everything else: a person can hunger after the world without ever being filled. The world disappoints — it does not fill. You could pour three worlds into the human heart and it would still be empty. But righteousness is filling — and not only filling, but satisfying. A person can be filled without being satisfied. A sinner may have his fill of sin, but that is a bitter kind of fullness, far from satisfaction. Proverbs 14:14: "A backslider in heart will have his fill of his own

ways." He will get all the sin he could want — more than enough. But this is not a satisfying fullness. It is the kind of fullness the condemned have in hell — full of the fury of God. But the person who hungers for righteousness will be filled to complete satisfaction. Jeremiah 31:14: "My people will be satisfied with My goodness." Psalm 63:5: "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness." Joseph first opened the mouths of the sacks, then filled them with grain (Genesis 42:25). God does the same — He first opens the soul's mouth with desire, then fills it with good things (Psalm 81:10). To understand this more fully, consider three things.

First, that God can fill the hungry soul. Second, why He fills the hungry soul. Third, how He fills the hungry soul.

First, God can fill the hungry soul. He is called a fountain (Psalm 36:9): "For with You is the fountain of life." A cistern may run dry and cannot satisfy us. Created things are often cracked cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13). But the fountain is ever full. God is a fountain. If we bring the vessels of our desire to this fountain, He is able to fill them. The fullness in God is, first, infinite. Though He fills us — and the angels, who have far greater capacity — He is never diminished, just as the sun, however brightly it shines, loses none of its light. Luke 8:46: "I was aware that power had gone out of Me." Though power goes out from Him, He has no less. The fullness of any created thing has limits — it rises only to a certain level. But God's fullness is infinite. It has both splendor and abundance — without boundary or bottom.

Second, God's fullness is constant. The fullness of created things shifts and ebbs. "I could have helped you before," someone might say, "but now my resources are low." The fig tree's blossoms

are quickly blown away. Created things cannot always do for us what they once could. But God is a constant fullness (Psalm 102:27): "You are the same." God can never be exhausted. His fullness overflows and never stops flowing. How good it is, then, to draw near to God (Psalm 73:28). It is well worth bringing our vessels to this source. It is a goodness that never runs dry.

Second, why does God fill the hungry soul? The reasons are as follows.

First, God fills the hungry soul out of His tender compassion. He knows that otherwise the spirit would fail before Him — the very souls He has made (Isaiah 57:16). If a starving person is not given food, he dies. God is too compassionate to let a hungry soul perish. When the crowd had nothing to eat, Christ was moved with compassion and worked a miracle to provide for them (Matthew 15:32). How much more will He have compassion on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. When a poor sinner sees himself nearly starving in sin — like the prodigal among his husks — and begins to hunger for Christ, saying, "There is bread enough in my Father's house," God will then out of His infinite compassion bring out the fatted calf and refresh that soul with the provisions of the Gospel. How deeply God's heart moves with compassion toward a hungry sinner! Hosea 11:8: "My heart is turned over within Me, all My compassions are kindled." Even we cannot see a poor creature at our door on the verge of starvation without our hearts softening toward them. Will the Father of mercies let a poor soul that hungers for the blessings of the Gospel leave empty-handed, without a gift of free grace? No — He will not. He cannot. Let the hungry sinner think: Though I am full of needs, my God is full of compassion.

Second, God fills the hungry soul in order to keep His word. Psalm 107:9; Jeremiah 41:14; Luke 6:21: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied." Isaiah 44:3: "I will pour out water on the thirsty land... I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring." Has God spoken? Then it will come to pass. Promises are binding. Once God has made a promise, He cannot go back on it. You who hunger for righteousness have God committed to your cause — He has, reverently speaking, staked His very word on your behalf. Just as His compassions never cease (Lamentations 3:22), He will not allow His faithfulness to fail (Psalm 89:33). If the hungry soul were not filled, then the promise would go unfulfilled.

Third, God fills the hungry soul because He Himself stirred up that hunger in the first place. He plants holy desires within us — and will He not then satisfy the very desires He placed there? In prayer, when God prepares the heart to pray, He prepares His ear to hear (Psalm 17:1). In the same way, when God prepares the heart to hunger, He prepares His hand to fill. It would make no sense to imagine God would refuse to satisfy the hunger He Himself created. God does nothing in vain. If He kindles a desire for righteousness and then leaves it unfilled, it would appear that He acted without purpose.

Fourth, God will fill the hungry because of the dear relationship He has with them — they are His children. We cannot turn away our own children when they are hungry. We would sooner take from ourselves to give to them. Luke 11:13: When a child born of God comes saying, Father, I am hungry — give me Christ; Father, I thirst — refresh me with the living streams of Your Spirit — can God refuse? Does God hear the raven when it cries, and will He not hear His own people when they cry? When the earth opens

its mouth and thirsts, God satisfies it (Psalm 65:9-10). If God satisfies the thirsty earth with rain, will He not satisfy the thirsty soul with grace?

Fifth, God will satisfy the hungry because the hungry soul is the most grateful for mercy. When a soul has been straining after God in restless longing, and God then fills it, how grateful that Christian becomes! The Lord loves to give His mercy where He will receive the most praise. We ourselves prefer to give to those who are genuinely thankful. Musicians love to play where the acoustics are best. God loves to bestow His gifts where He will hear them praised. The hungry soul places the crown of praise on the head of free grace (Psalm 50:23): "He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me."

Third, how does God fill the hungry soul?

Answer: There are three kinds of filling.

First, with grace. Second, with peace. Third, with glory.

First, God fills the hungry soul with grace. Grace is filling because it is perfectly suited to the soul. Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:55). This fullness of grace is fullness in kind, not necessarily in degree. There is something of every grace, even if not perfection in any grace.

Second, God fills the hungry soul with peace (Romans 15:13): "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace." This peace flows from Christ. Israel found honey in the rock. This honey of peace comes from the Rock, Christ. John 16:33: "That in Me you may have peace." This peace is so filling that it makes the soul long for heaven. The cluster of grapes from Canaan whets the appetite and quickens the pursuit of the full harvest.

Third, God fills the hungry soul with glory. Glory is a filling thing. Psalm 17:15: "As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake." When a Christian awakens from the sleep of death, he will be satisfied — standing in the radiant beams of God's own image. Then the soul will be filled to the brim. The glory of heaven is so sweet that the soul will still thirst — yet so infinite that it will also be completely filled.

"Those who drink of You, O Christ, refreshed by the sweet stream, shall thirst no more — and yet shall thirst still."

What an encouragement this is to hunger for righteousness! Those who do shall be filled. God commands us to fill the hungry (Isaiah 58:10). He rebukes those who do not fill the hungry (Isaiah 32:6). Do we think He will fail to do the very thing He holds us accountable for neglecting? Come with hunger for Christ, and be confident of satisfaction. God keeps an open house for hungry sinners — He invites His guests and tells them to come without money (Isaiah 55:1-2). God's own nature draws Him to fill the hungry, and His promise binds Him to it. Consider: why did Christ receive the Spirit without measure (John 3:34)? It was not for His own sake — He was already infinitely full. He was filled with the holy anointing precisely so that He might pour grace out on the hungry soul. Are you in the dark? Christ was filled with wisdom so that He might teach you. Are you defiled? Christ was filled with grace so that He might cleanse you. Will the soul not come to Christ, who was filled for the express purpose of filling the hungry? We love to knock at a wealthy person's door. In our Father's house

there is more than enough bread. Come with desire, and you will leave with comfort — filled with the benefits of Christ's blood, the work of His Spirit, and the warmth of His love.

Two objections are raised against this.

Objection 1, from the worldly person: I have hungered after righteousness, but I have not been filled.

First answer: You say you hunger but are not satisfied. Perhaps God is not satisfied with your hunger. You have opened your mouth wide, but you have not opened your ear. When God has called you to pray with your family and to put sin to death, you have closed your ear against God like the deaf snake (Zechariah 7:11). No wonder you have not experienced the filling you desire. You have opened your mouth but stopped your ears. A child who refuses to obey a parent is made to go without.

Second, perhaps you crave temptation as eagerly as you crave righteousness. At the Lord's Supper you appear to burn with desire for Christ — but when the next temptation arrives, whether to drunkenness or sexual sin, you give in and welcome it. Satan only has to beckon, and you come running. You open your heart faster to the tempter than to Christ. And you wonder that you are not filled with the rich things of God's house?

Third, perhaps you hunger more after the world than after righteousness. The young man in the Gospel wanted Christ, but the world sat closer to his heart than Christ did. Hypocrites pant more after the dust of the earth than after the water of life. Israel had no manna while their own supplies lasted. Those who feed ex-

cessively on earthly things should not expect to be filled with manna from heaven. If money is your god, do not expect to receive another God in the Lord's Supper.

Objection 2, from the sincere Christian: I have had genuine desires after God, but I am not filled.

First answer: You may have a filling of grace even if not of comfort. If God has not filled you with joy, He has filled you with goodness (Psalm 107:9). Look into your heart and see the quiet work of the Spirit. The dew may be falling even when the honeycomb has not yet begun to drip.

Second, wait a little longer, and you will be filled. The Gospel is a spiritual banquet, feasting the soul with grace and comfort. Only those who wait at the table are served. Isaiah 25:6, 9: "The Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain... And it will be said in that day, 'Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us... Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.'" Spiritual mercies are not only worth longing for — they are worth waiting for.

Third, even if God does not fill His people to complete satisfaction in this life, they will be filled in heaven — the vessels of their desire filled as the water jars at Cana were filled (John 2), to the very brim.

CHAPTER 15



Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

A discourse on mercifulness.

These verses, like the steps of Solomon's temple, lead us upward into the Holy of Holies. We climb another step higher now: Blessed are the merciful. There has never been a greater need to preach on mercifulness than in the unmerciful times we live in. It is reported in the life of Chrysostom that he preached extensively on this topic, and because he pressed Christians so often toward mercy, many called him the alms-preacher, the preacher for mercy. Our times need many Chrysostoms.

Blessed are the merciful. Mercy appears at both the beginning and the end of this verse — at the front it is a duty; at the end it is a reward. The Hebrew word for godly actually means merciful — the more godly, the more merciful. The teaching I will draw from these words, which covers the whole subject, is this:

The merciful person is a blessed person. Just as a curse hangs over the head of the unmerciful (Psalm 109:6-9): "Appoint a wicked man over him... when he is judged, let him come forth guilty, and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few... let his

children be fatherless and his wife a widow. Let his children wander about and beg... Let the creditor seize all that he has... let there be no one to extend lovingkindness to him." Why such a curse? Verse 16: "Because he did not remember to show lovingkindness." See what a long vial of God's judgment is poured out on the unmerciful! By contrast, the blessings of the Almighty crown and surround the merciful person. 2 Samuel 22:26; Psalm 37:26; Psalm 41:1 — the merciful man is a blessed man. To develop this further, I will show: first, what mercifulness means; second, the different expressions of mercy.

First, what is mercifulness? It is a tender disposition by which we take the sufferings of others to heart and are ready at every opportunity to do good to them.

Question 1: How do mercy and love differ?

Answer: In some ways they are alike, and in some ways they differ — like two streams that rise from different springs but meet in the same river. Love and mercy differ in this way: love is broader. It extends to a wider range of situations. Mercy is specifically directed toward those who are suffering. Love extends more widely. Love is like a friend who visits people when they are well. Mercy is like a physician who visits only those who are sick. Also, love acts more from affection; mercy acts more from a sense of duty. Mercy lends its help to another. Love gives its heart to another. So they differ. But love and mercy agree in this: both are ready to do good; both have compassionate hearts and carry healing in their hands.

The source of true mercifulness goes deeper than natural temperament. Genuine mercy, in its fullest sense, flows from the work of grace in the heart. By nature we are far from merciful. The sinner is a thorn bush, not a fig tree bearing sweet fruit. It is the mark of a natural person to be without mercy (Romans 1:31). A wicked person, like Jehoram, has compassion that has simply fallen away (2 Chronicles 21:19). This is why such a person is compared to stone (Zechariah 7:11) — his heart does not melt in mercy. Before conversion, the sinner is compared to a wolf for his savageness, a lion for his ferocity, a bee for his sting (Psalm 118:12), and an adder for his poison (Psalm 140:3). By nature we do not produce oil but poison — not the oil of mercy but the venom of malice.

Beyond the cruelty that is within us by nature, Satan actively cultivates more. The prince of the air works in people (Ephesians 2:2). He is a fierce spirit — called the red dragon (Revelation 12:3). If he possesses people, no wonder they become implacable and merciless. What mercy can come from hell? If the heart is shaped toward mercy, it is because grace has changed it. When the sun comes out, the ice melts. When the Sun of Righteousness shines with the rays of grace on the soul, the heart melts into mercy and tenderness. You must first become a new person before you can become a merciful person. You cannot help a member of Christ until you yourself are a member.

Second, the different expressions of mercy, or how many ways a person can show mercy. Mercy is a fountain that flows in five streams. We must be merciful toward: first, the souls of others; second, the reputations of others; third, the material needs of others; fourth, the offenses of others; fifth, the poverty of others.

Showing that mercy must extend to the souls of others.

First, we must be merciful toward the souls of others — this is spiritual almsgiving. Soul-mercy is the highest form, because the soul is the most precious thing. It is a vessel of honor, a seed of eternity, a spark kindled by the breath of God, a precious diamond set in a ring of clay. The soul has the blood of God shed for its redemption and the image of God to adorn it. Being of such high origin — sprung from the Ancient of Days — the mercy shown to a soul is necessarily the greatest mercy of all. Soul-mercy toward others takes four forms.

First, by pitying them. If I weep (says Augustine) for the body from which the soul has departed, how much more should I weep for the soul from which God has departed? If we had seen the man in the Gospel cutting himself with stones and bleeding (Mark 5:5), it would have moved our pity. To see a sinner stabbing himself and staining his own hands with his blood should cause our hearts to ache. What our eyes see should touch our hearts. God was angry with Edom precisely because they cast off all pity (Amos 1:11).

Second, soul-mercy means giving counsel and speaking honestly to sinners. Tell them what a desperate condition they are in — trapped in the gall of bitterness. Show them their danger. They are standing on the edge of the bottomless pit, and if death gives them a nudge, they fall in. We must sweeten our words with kindness and use all the gentleness we can (2 Timothy 2:25): "With gentleness correcting those who are in opposition." Fire melts and ointment softens. Words of love can melt hard hearts into repentance. This is soul-mercy. God gave a law (Exodus 23:5) that if you saw your enemy's donkey collapsed under its load, you should help the

animal. On this, Chrysostom says: We will help a beast that has fallen under a burden — and shall we withhold help from those who have fallen under the far heavier burden of sin?

Third, soul-mercy means giving frank rebuke to stubborn sinners. There is a cruel kind of mercy — when we see people going deeper into sin and simply leave them alone. And there is a merciful kind of severity — when we confront people about their sin and refuse to let them walk quietly to hell. Leviticus 19:17: "You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him." Misguided tenderness is no better than cruelty. Titus 1:13: "Reprove them severely" — the Greek word means sharply, as a cutting blade. A surgeon cuts and opens the flesh, but always with a cure in view. These are healing wounds. When we give a cutting reproof — when we open the conscience and let out the sin — we are performing spiritual surgery. This is showing mercy. Jude 23: "Save others, snatching them out of the fire." If a man were on fire and you hurt him a little while pulling him out, he would be grateful and call it a kindness. When people are told of their sin, some say: this is harsh treatment. No — this is showing mercy. If a man's house were on fire and a neighbor saw it but said nothing for fear of disturbing his sleep — would that not be cruelty? When we see people asleep in spiritual death, with the fire of God's wrath ready to burn around them, and we stay silent — are we not accessories to their destruction?

Fourth, soul-mercy means praying for others. This is like medicine used in the most desperate cases, and it often restores the patient. James 5:16: "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." Just as it heals the sick body, it can also

heal the soul sick with sin. There is a story of a man who had given his soul to the devil and was rescued through the prayers of Luther. When Eutychus fell from a high loft and was picked up dead, Paul fell on him — that is, he prayed over him fervently — and prayed him back to life (Acts 20:9, 11). Through sin the soul has fallen from a high place — the state of innocence. Fervent prayer often brings life back to such a dead soul.

Use 1. See what a blessed work the ministry is! The preaching of the word is nothing other than showing mercy to souls. It is a powerful and glorious instrument in the hands of the Lord of hosts for tearing down the devil's strongholds. The ministry of the word does not merely bring light — it brings the medicine that opens eyes to see that light. It is an ordinance that kills sin and awakens souls — the power of God for salvation. How great enemies to their own souls are those who oppose the ministry of the word! It is said that people who live near the equator curse the sun and are glad when it sets, because of its burning heat. Foolish sinners curse the sunrise of the ministry and are offended by its light, because it comes close to their sins and scorches their consciences — even though in the end it saves their souls.

Use 2. This rebukes those who show no mercy to souls.

First, corrupt magistrates who either suppress the knowledge of the truth or license wickedness — allowing sin by granting it legal protection. The message of such tolerance is: if people want to go to hell, no one will stop them. Is human nature not already poisoned enough? Do not people sin fast enough without political structures that push them further into wickedness? Must they have

such favorable winds from powerful people that carry them at full speed toward the devil? This is the opposite of soul-mercy. What a heavy account such leaders will give on the day of judgment!

Second, corrupt ministers. First, those who have no compassion for the souls of their people — who do not grieve for them or pray for them, who seek not the people themselves but what they can get from them. They preach not from love but for income. Their concern is more for their salary than for souls. How can they be called spiritual fathers when they have no compassion? These are hirelings, not true ministers.

Second, those who do not nourish the souls of their people with solid truth. When Christ sent out His apostles, He gave them their message and told them what to preach (Matthew 10:7): "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." On this Luther says: The ministers of Christ must preach things that belong to the kingdom of God — the forgiveness of sins, sanctification, and living by faith. It is unmerciful to souls when, instead of breaking the bread of life, ministers fill people's heads with mere theories and speculations — when they tickle the imagination instead of touching the conscience, giving precious souls entertainment rather than food.

Third, those who bury truth in complicated language and preach as though speaking a foreign tongue. Some ministers love to soar high like an eagle, flying above their congregation's ability to follow, aiming to be admired rather than understood. They are like those difficult authors who cannot be read without a commentary. God calls His ministers ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) — but they must not be like foreign ambassadors who require an interpreter to be understood. It is unmerciful to souls to preach in a way that cannot be understood. Ministers should be stars that give

light, not clouds that block out the truth. Paul was learned, yet clear. Clarity is the mark of good communication. It is a cruelty to souls to make simple things unnecessarily complicated. Many in our own day are guilty of this — going into the pulpit only to tie knots, thinking it a mark of greatness to leave the people bewildered. This reflects more pride than mercy.

Fourth, those who watch others go on in sin but say nothing. When people display their sin openly like Sodom, it is the minister's duty to raise his voice like a trumpet and show the house of Jacob their sin (Isaiah 58:1). Zeal in the ministry is as appropriate as fire on the altar. He who lets another person sin and stays silent is a kind of murderer. The watchman who sees the enemy approaching and gives no warning deserves death (Ezekiel 3:20).

Fifth, those who poison souls with false teaching. How dangerous is the disease of a corrupt mind! Spiritual delusion is worse than physical fever. What can be said of ministers who serve poison to their people in a golden cup? Are they not utterly without mercy? Then there are others — unworthy of the name of minister — who travel from place to place, agents of the devil, roaming the earth to devour souls. It is heartbreaking to see unstable people led astray by rough and unqualified men who fill their congregations with confusion and error, leaving them fit more for a madhouse than for the New Jerusalem. All of these are merciless toward souls.

Let me urge all who fear God to show mercy to souls. Strengthen the weak, reclaim the wandering, lift up those who have fallen. James 5:20: "He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death."

Showing that Christians must be protective of one another's reputations.

Second, we must be merciful toward the reputations of others. A good name is one of the greatest blessings on earth — no string of pearls adorns a person more than a good reputation. Because this is so, we ought to be very careful with the reputations of others. Those who have no conscience about destroying a brother's good name must be considered deeply unmerciful. Their throats are open graves for burying the honor and standing of others (Romans 3:13). It is great cruelty to murder a person in his reputation. Song of Solomon 5:7: "The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me, they struck me and wounded me; the guardsmen of the walls took away my shawl from me." Some interpreters understand this as referring to her honor and reputation, which covered her like a beautiful veil. The root of this merciless treatment of reputations is twofold.

First, pride. Pride cannot endure to be outshone. It cannot bear to see others surpass it in gifts or honor. So it cuts another person down in reputation — to make them appear smaller. The proud person tears down others' standing so that, by comparison, he imagines he shines more brightly. The breath of a proud person brings a blight on another's good name.

Second, envy (1 Peter 2:1). An envious person resents another's honor and seeks to damage his reputation. True religion teaches us to rejoice in the esteem and praise that others receive. Romans 1:8: "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world." A good reputation brings credit to the Christian faith (Hebrews 11:4). If

those who profess godliness have a bad name, religion itself suffers in reputation. But envy, conspiring with the devil, lays a fuse and lights it with hellfire to blow up another's good name.

Question: In how many ways can we be merciless toward the reputations of others?

First answer: By spreading false reports — a sin Scripture explicitly forbids (Exodus 23:1): "You shall not bear a false report." Excellence is commonly struck down by slander. Psalm 64:3: "They sharpen their tongue like a sword... to shoot their arrows, even bitter words." The slanderer's tongue fires words that wound a person's reputation and make it bleed to death. The saints in every age have encountered merciless people who have charged them with things they never did. The Jesuit Surius reported that Luther learned his theology from the devil and died drunk. But Melancthon, who wrote Luther's biography, testifies that he died in a most godly and holy manner and offered an excellent prayer just before his death. David complained of the same treatment (Psalm 35:11): "Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know." The Greek word for devil means slanderer. 1 Timothy 3:11: "Not malicious gossips." Some people see no serious harm in defaming another person. But know this — to do so is to play the part of the devil. How many merciless people go by the name of Christian yet play the devil's role in spreading their lies and slanders! Wicked people in Scripture are called dogs (Psalm 22:16). Slanderers are not like the dogs that licked Lazarus's sores to heal them, but like the dogs that devoured Jezebel — they tear apart precious reputations. The emperor Valentinian decreed that

anyone openly convicted of slander should be put to death. Pope Gregory decreed that such a person should be excommunicated and barred from the Lord's Supper. I think it was a just decree.

Second answer: We are merciless to others' reputations when we accept slander and pass on what we hear. Leviticus 19:16: "You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people." A good person "does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend" (Psalm 15:3). We must not only avoid spreading false reports — we must refuse to receive them. To pass on a story before speaking to the person involved and confirming the truth is merciless, and there is no escaping the sin of it. The same Hebrew word in Exodus 23:1 means both to spread a slander and to receive one. The receiver is as guilty as the thief. Have we not received stolen goods in this sense? When others have stolen away their brother's good name, have we not accepted those stolen goods? There would not be so many willing to spread false rumors if they did not see how eagerly others received them.

We deal mercilessly with others' reputations when we diminish their true worth — when we make more of their weaknesses and less of their virtues. James 4:11: "Do not speak against one another." I have read of an abbot named Idor who was never heard to speak ill of anyone. Augustine could not bear to hear people minimize or belittle the reputation of others. Wicked people are constantly shaving away their neighbor's credit — and they make thick shavings, cutting away everything good until nothing is left but material for insult. Merciless people have a diabolical skill for reducing another's worth to nothing — so cleverly diminishing someone else's merit that it evaporates entirely. Some people cannot

create anything good, but they have a remarkable power to destroy what is good in others. They find it easier to erase goodness in others than to imitate it.

We are merciless toward others' reputations when we know they have been falsely accused yet say nothing in their defense. A person can sometimes wrong another by silence as much as by slander. A truly merciful person speaks up as an advocate when his brother is unjustly accused. When the apostles, filled with the Spirit, were accused of being drunk, Peter publicly defended them (Acts 2:15). A merciful person removes the dead fly from the box of ointment.

Those who bear false witness against others are deeply merciless toward their reputations. Exodus 23:1: "Do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness." Putting the hand here refers to swearing a false oath — taking an oath on the Bible and testifying to a lie. A false witness is compared to a hammer (Proverbs 25:18) because he is hardened — first in shamelessness, for he blushes at nothing; and second in cruelty, for there is no softness in a hammer, and no compassion in a false witness. In all these ways, people are merciless toward the reputations of others.

Let me urge all Christians, as they take their faith seriously, to show mercy to the reputations of others — to be careful and protective of people's good names. Consider the following.

First, what a serious sin it is to defame anyone (Titus 3:2; 1 Peter 2:1): "Putting aside all... malice and all slander" — envy and slander are placed side by side.

The word translated 'putting aside' means to throw something away with force and disgust — the way Paul shook off the viper into the fire (Acts 28:5).

Second, consider the real harm slander does. When you take away someone's good name, you wound him in what is most precious to him. It would be better to take a man's property than his reputation. By destroying his reputation you bury him alive. It is an injury that cannot be repaired. A wound to the reputation is like a flaw in a diamond or a stain in fine cloth — it never fully comes out. No physician can heal wounds made by the tongue.

Third, God will call people to account for it. If every idle word must be answered for, how much more will reproachful slander? God will one day make inquiry for reputations as much as for lives. Let all this move you to caution and care. You would hate to steal another person's possessions — and a person's good name is worth far more. He who takes away another person's good name commits a greater sin than if he had stolen the grain from his field or the goods from his shop.

Above all, take care never to wound the reputations of godly people. God has placed a crown of honor on their heads — will you take it off? Numbers 12:8: "Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?" To defame the saints is nothing less than defaming God Himself, since they bear His image and are members of Christ. Consider how Christ will respond to this on the last day! Under the old law it was a sin to slander a young woman — how much greater a sin to slander the bride of Christ? If the names of the saints are written in heaven, will you erase them on earth? Be merciful to the reputations of others.

Showing that mercy must in some cases extend to the financial situations of others, and that Christians must not always press for every last right the law allows.

Third, be merciful toward the financial situations of others. If someone owes you a debt and God's providence has brought him low so that he cannot pay, do not crush him when he is already sinking — relent something of what the law strictly allows. Blessed are the merciful. The wicked are compared to predators that live by plunder and spoil, careless of the harm they cause. Psalm 10:9: "He lurks in a hiding place as a lion in his lair; he lurks to catch the afflicted; he catches the afflicted when he draws him into his net." Chrysostom says that being drawn into the net refers to the way the rich drag the poor into binding legal agreements and then seize everything they own when they cannot pay. It is not justice but cruelty, when others lie at our mercy, to behave like the hard-hearted creditor in the Gospel who grabbed his debtor by the throat and demanded payment (Matthew 18:28). God gave a law (Deuteronomy 24:6): "No one shall take a handmill or an upper millstone in pledge, for he would be taking a life in pledge." In this we should imitate God, who even in the midst of judgment remembers mercy. God does not demand the full penalty of the law from us. When we have nothing to pay and confess our debt, He freely forgives (Proverbs 28:13; Matthew 18:27).

This does not mean we cannot fairly pursue what is rightfully ours — but when others have been brought low and come to us humbly, we ought in good conscience to forgive something of the debt. Blessed are the merciful.

Showing that Christians must be merciful toward the offenses others commit against them.

We must be merciful toward the offenses others commit against us — ready to extend mercy to those who have wronged us. Stephen, the first martyr, did exactly this (Acts 7:60) — he knelt down and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" When he prayed for himself, he stood. But when he came to pray for his enemies, he knelt — showing, as Bernard noted, his earnestness in prayer and how deeply he longed for God to forgive them. This is a rare kind of mercy. Proverbs 19:11: "It is his glory to overlook a transgression." The mercy that forgives injury is both the test and the crown of Christianity. Bishop Cranmer had a merciful disposition. If anyone who had wronged him came seeking a favor, he would do everything in his power to help that person — so much so that a saying grew up: 'Do Cranmer an injury, and he will be your friend for life.' To overcome evil with good and answer malice with mercy is truly heroic, and makes religion shine in the eyes of all who see it.

That mercy must also extend to meeting the needs of others.

We must be merciful toward the needs of others. This is primarily what the verse has in mind. A good person does not, like a snake, curl inward on himself. He moves outward, directly toward others. He is always generous and ready to give (Psalm 37:26). This kind of merciful giving to meet others' needs takes three forms.

First, thoughtful attention (Psalm 41:1): "How blessed is he who considers the helpless." There are four things you must consider.

First, this could have been your own situation. You yourself might have needed another's charity — and if you had, how welcome and refreshing that help would have been.

Second, consider what a painful condition poverty is. Though Chrysostom calls poverty the road to heaven, whoever travels that road goes weeping along the way. Think about the poor — see their tears, their sighs, their faint cries. Look at the deep lines carved in their faces and ask yourself whether you should not sow seeds of mercy into those furrows. The poor person feeds on sorrow and drinks tears (Psalm 80:5). Like Jacob on a cold night, he has clouds for a canopy and a stone for a pillow.

Consider further that poverty often becomes not only a burden but a trap — it exposes people to great temptation, which is why Agur prayed, "Give me not poverty" (Proverbs 30:8). Need pushes people toward dishonest paths. The poor will risk their souls for money. If the rich would take this seriously, their generosity might prevent much sin.

Third, consider why the wise God has permitted inequality in the world — it is precisely so that mercy might be exercised. If everyone were rich, there would be no need for charity, and the merciful person would never be known. If the traveler on the road to Jericho had not been beaten and left half-dead, the Good Samaritan who poured oil and wine into his wounds would never have had an opportunity to show his mercy.

Fourth, consider how quickly the scales of providence can tip. We ourselves may be brought to poverty, and when that day comes, it will be a great comfort to have helped others when we were able. Ecclesiastes 11:2: "Give a portion to seven, and even to

eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth." We cannot count on smooth days ahead. The cup that now overflows with wine may later be filled with bitter water. Ruth 1:21: "I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty." How many people have we seen who once possessed great wealth and then suddenly had to trade their estate for a crust of bread?

It is wise, then, to pay attention to the needs of others. Remember that the scene can change quickly — we may one day wear the poor man's clothes ourselves. And if hardship comes, it will bring no guilt to our hearts if we can think back and know that while we had an estate, we spent it generously on Christ's needy members. This is the first element of mercifulness: thoughtful attention.

Second, genuine compassion (Isaiah 58:10): "If you give yourself to the hungry." Generosity begins with compassion. The Hebrew word for mercy actually means 'bowels' — the deepest inner feeling. Christ first felt compassion for the crowd, and then worked a miracle to feed them (Matthew 15:32). Charity without compassion is mechanical. True religion produces tenderness — just as it melts the heart in tears of contrition before God, it also melts it in compassion toward others. Isaiah 16:11: "My heart sounds like a harp for Moab." When our compassion sounds, our giving makes sweet music in the ears of God.

Third, mercifulness involves generous giving. Deuteronomy 15:8: "You shall freely open your hand to him and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need." The word 'to scatter abroad' (Psalm 112:9) implies large-scale giving — like water overflowing its banks. If God has blessed people with wealth and made prosperity shine on their homes, they must not enclose it and hoard it

for themselves. They must be like the moon, which receives its light from the sun and shares that light with the world. Ancient writers used oil as the symbol of charity. The golden oil of mercy, like the oil poured on Aaron's head, must flow down to the poor, who are the lower hem of the garment. This kind of generous giving to meet the needs of others — God commands it, and grace drives us to it.

First reason: God commands it. There is an explicit statute (Leviticus 25:35): "If your brother becomes poor and his means fail with you, then you are to support him." The Hebrew word means 'strengthen him' — put a silver crutch under him when he is about to fall. It is striking to see how much care God took for the poor. Beyond what was given privately, God established many public laws for the relief of the poor. Exodus 23:11: "But the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat." God's intention in this law was that the poor should be well provided for — they were free to eat whatever grew on its own that year, whether from fields, vineyards, or olive groves.

There was another law given (Leviticus 19:9): "Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleaning of your harvest." The corners of the field were to be left uncut for the sake of the poor. When the owners reaped, they must not press their sickle too close to the ground. Something of a second harvest had to be left behind — the shorter stalks and grain bending toward the ground were reserved for the poor.

God made another law in favor of the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29): "At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall deposit it in your town. The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied." Jewish scholars record that every third year, in addition to the regular tithe given to the Levites — called the perpetual tithe (Numbers 18:21) — the Jewish people set apart another tenth of their produce for widows and orphans, known as the tithe of the poor. Beyond this, the poor were to have a share in the great annual festivals (Deuteronomy 16:11).

Just as caring for the needy was commanded under the old covenant, so it stands in full force under the Gospel. 1 Timothy 6:17-18: "Instruct those who are rich in this present world... to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share." This is not optional advice — it is a direct charge, and failing to obey it brings a person under Gospel-level guilt. What good is gold buried and locked in the ground? And what good is a large estate if it is hoarded and hidden away, never seeing the light of day?

Second reason: Just as God commands it, so grace compels us toward acts of mercy and generosity. 2 Corinthians 5:14: "The love of Christ controls us." Grace comes into the heart with transforming power. Grace does not lie dormant in the soul — it drives the soul toward vigorous and visible action. Grace can no more be hidden than fire. Like new wine, it must find an outlet. Grace does not rest in the heart the way a stone rests in the ground, but the way a seed rests in the ground — it must spring up into good works.

A defense of the Church of England.

Use 1 may serve to defend the Church of England against the slander of hostile critics. Julian accused Christians of relying on faith alone. The Church of Rome charges us with being opposed to good works. We do not argue for the merit of good works, but we absolutely affirm their necessity. Titus 3:14: "Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs." We read that the angels had wings and hands under their wings (Ezekiel 1:8) — a picture of the truth that Christians must not only have the wings of faith to soar, but hands beneath those wings to do works of mercy. Titus 3:8: "This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds." The lamp of faith must be filled with the oil of charity. Faith alone justifies — but justifying faith is never alone. You might as well try to separate weight from lead or heat from fire as to separate works from faith. Good works are not the cause of salvation, but they are its evidence. They are not the foundation, but they are the structure built upon it. Faith must not be built on works — but works must be built on faith. Romans 7:4: "You were made to die to the law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another... that we might bear fruit for God." Faith is the grace that unites us to Christ; good works are the fruit that this union produces. To vindicate the teaching of our church and to honor good works, I will set out four propositions.

First proposition: Works are distinct from faith. It is a mistake to imagine that works are contained within faith the way a diamond is enclosed in a ring. No — they are distinct, just as the sap in a vine is different from the clusters of grapes that grow from it.

Second proposition: Works are the test of faith. James 2:18: "Show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Works are faith's credentials — its visible proof. If you see a person full of good works, said Bernard, charity requires you not to doubt his faith. We judge the health of the body by the pulse, where blood moves and works. Christian, judge the health of your faith by the pulse of mercy and generosity. Faith is like a legal deed. To make a deed valid, three things are required: the writing, the seal, and the witnesses. In the same way, to confirm and verify faith, three things are needed: the writing (the word of God), the seal (the Spirit of God), and the witnesses (good works). Faith justifies works; works testify to faith.

Third proposition: Works honor faith. These fruits adorn the trees of righteousness. Let the generosity of your hand (said Clement of Alexandria) be the ornament of your faith — wear it as a holy bracelet on your wrist. Job 29:14-15: "I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame... I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban." While Job was advocate and benefactor to the poor, this was the badge of his honor — it clothed him like a robe and crowned him like a diadem. This is what removes reproach and makes others speak well of religion — when they see good works as attendants waiting on faith.

Fourth proposition: Good works are in some respects more excellent than faith — in two ways.

First, because they are of a more outward-reaching nature. Though faith is more essential for our own standing before God, good works benefit others more. Faith is a receiving grace — it op-

erates in its own sphere, working for one's own relationship with God. Works go outward, for the good of others. And it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Second, good works are more visible and evident than faith. Faith is a more hidden grace — it can live in the heart without being seen. But when works are joined with it, faith shines forth in its true beauty. A garden may be full of flowers, but they cannot be seen until there is light. In the same way, a Christian's heart may be rich with faith, but it is like a flower in the dark — not seen until works appear. When this light shines before others, faith appears in its true colors.

A word of rebuke for the unmerciful.

Use 2: If a merciful disposition is the mark of a good person, then this rebukes sharply those who are far from it. Their hearts are like the scales of Leviathan, sealed shut (Job 41:15). They move only in their own circle and take no interest in others' needs. They may have a flourishing estate but, like the man in the Gospel, they have a withered hand that cannot reach out for any good purpose. These people are like the churlish Nabal. 1 Samuel 25:11: "Shall I then take my bread and my water... and give it to men whose origin I do not know?" It was said of the Emperor Pertinax that he governed a vast empire with a small and stingy heart.

In Athens there was a temple called the Temple of Mercy, dedicated to charitable purposes. The greatest shame was to be told you had never entered it. It is the greatest disgrace for a Christian to be unmerciful. Greedy people, in enriching themselves, debase themselves — building a monopoly on wealth and committing idolatry with money. In times of plague it is sad to have your house

shut up. But it is worse to have your heart shut up. How terrible to have a sea of sin and not a drop of mercy! The greedy heart is hard as stone (Job 41:24). One might as well try to draw oil from flint as to draw the golden oil of charity from such a stony heart. Coldness of heart is a sign of death. When people's compassion for acts of mercy is frozen, that coldness signals that they are dead in sin. Under the old law, shellfish were counted unclean — perhaps because the meat was locked inside a shell and hard to reach. Those who seal all their wealth inside the shell of their own strongbox, refusing to let others benefit from it, deserve to be counted among the unclean. How many people have lost their souls by being so careful to save their money!

Some will give the poor kind words, and nothing more. James 2:15-16: "If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body — what use is that?" Kind words are a cold kind of charity. The poor cannot live on air. Let your words flow as smooth as oil — they will not heal wounds. Let them drop like honey — they will not feed the hungry. 1 Corinthians 13:1: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." It is better to be charitable as a saint than eloquent as an angel. Those who are cruel to the poor should know this: you are unchristianing yourselves. Mercilessness is the sin of pagans (Romans 1:31). When you set aside compassion, you set aside the mark of Christianity. Ambrose said that when we fail to help someone we see on the verge of starvation, we are guilty of his death. James 2:13: "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy." How do people ex-

pect to receive mercy from Christ when they never showed mercy to Christ in His members? Dives refused Lazarus a crumb of bread — and Dives was refused a drop of water. At the last day we hear the sinner's indictment (Matthew 25:42): "I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink." Christ does not say, 'You took away my food' — He says, 'You gave Me none.' When Christ's poor come to your door and you send them away, the day may come when you knock at heaven's gate and Christ says, 'Depart from Me, you who are cursed.'

To put it plainly, greed is a foolish sin. God called the rich man in the parable a fool (Luke 12:20). The greedy person does not even enjoy what he has. He poisons his own life, tormenting himself with constant anxiety — how to gain more, how to increase it, how to protect it. And what is the result? Often, as a just reward for miserable stinginess, God withers and blights the very estate the greedy man was hoarding. God frequently allows the thief to take and the moth to consume what was unjustly and mercilessly withheld from the poor.

Before I leave this point, I am grieved that any who pass as decent, religious people should come under this charge — that any professing Christians should be guilty of greed and mercilessness. God's own people are told to clothe themselves with compassion (Colossians 3:12). These devout misers are a reproach to Christianity — a blemish on the face of religion. The ancient writer Aelian records that in India there is a creature called a griffin — having four legs and wings — so that it is hard to classify it as either beast or bird. In the same way, I might speak of stingy religious people: they have the wings of profession, as if soaring to-

ward heaven, but the feet of animals, walking on the earth and licking the dust. Take warning: if your religion does not overcome your greed, your greed will in the end overcome your religion. Greed, however fair its excuses when it first enters the heart, will never stop pressing until it has choked every good beginning and driven all true religion out of the heart.

An appeal toward mercifulness.

Use 3: I come now to the appeal — to urge all Christians to clothe themselves with compassion and be ready to respond to the suffering and needs of others. Ambrose calls charity the sum of Christianity. The Apostle makes it part of the very definition of true religion (James 1:27): "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress." The Hebrew word for 'poor' means someone who is emptied or drained dry. The poor are exhausted of strength, beauty, and resources — dried up like ponds. Let the streams of your charity fill them again. The poor are, in a sense, buried alive — the comfort of their lives is gone. God sends His springs into the valleys (Psalm 104:10). Let the springs of your generosity flow into the valleys of poverty. Your gentlest and most generous gifts should fall on the lowest ground. What is all your apparent devotion worth without generosity and mercy? Basil said he had known many people who prayed and fasted but never helped those in distress — they wanted a kind of zeal that costs nothing. What good does all their apparent virtue do? We read that incense was to be placed on the fire (Leviticus 16:13) — the flame of devotion must be scented with the incense of charity. Aaron was to wear both a bell and a pomegranate on his robe. Some scholars note that the pomegranate was a symbol of good works. Those who have no

good works are missing the pomegranate. The wise men did not only bow the knee to Christ — they also offered Him gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense (Matthew 2:11). Verbal expressions of devotion are not enough. We must not only worship Christ but also give generously to His members. Isaac did not bless Jacob on the basis of his voice alone — he felt and touched his hands, and believing them to be Esau's, he blessed him. God will not bless people on the basis of their voices alone — their loud prayers and devout speeches. But if He feels Esau's hands — if their hands have done good works — then He blesses them.

I urge you, then, to acts of mercy. Let your hands drip with the myrrh of generosity — sow your golden seed. Remember this excellent saying of Augustine: 'Give the poor what you cannot keep, so that you may receive what you cannot lose.' There is no shortage of opportunities to be merciful. Poverty is everywhere. Hear the orphan's cry. Have pity on the widow's tears. Some people lack work — it would be a great act of mercy to set them to it. Others are past the age of work — be eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. Some whole families are sinking unless a merciful hand helps to hold them up. Before I offer reasons to encourage generosity, let me address three objections that stand in the way.

Objection 1: If we give too much, we may end up in need ourselves.

Answer: Let Basil answer this: 'Wells from which water is drawn spring ever more freely' (Proverbs 11:25). "The generous man will be prosperous." Luther tells of a monastery in Austria that was very prosperous while it gave to the poor each year — but when it stopped giving, the monastery began to decline. Nothing is lost by doing our duty. An estate can be shared without being de-

pleted. Flowers give honey to the bees yet lose none of their own fruit. When the candle of prosperity shines on us, we can light our neighbor's darkness and be no less bright ourselves. Whatever is given to godly causes, God replenishes by some other means — as the loaves multiplied in the breaking, or as the widow's oil increased as she poured it out (1 Kings 17:16).

Objection 2: I cannot do what others do — build churches, establish hospitals, found libraries, or support students at university.

Answer: If you cannot do as much, do something. Let there be quality of virtue even where there is no great quantity of wealth. The widow's two small coins cast into the treasury were accepted (Luke 21). God, as Chrysostom notes, did not look at the smallness of her gift but at the greatness of her heart. Under the old law, if a person could not bring a lamb as an offering, two turtledoves were sufficient. We read (Exodus 35) that the people brought gold, silver, and goat hair for the building of the tabernacle. On this Origen says: 'Lord, I want to bring something to the building of Your temple — if not gold to make the mercy-seat, if not silk to make the curtains, then at least a little goat hair, so that I will not be found among those who brought nothing to Your temple.'

Objection 3: I have nothing at all to give to those in need.

First answer: Do you truly have nothing? Nothing to spend on your own desires? Do you have money for your pride and self-indulgence? And yet you can find nothing to give to Christ's poor members?

Second answer: Even granting this excuse is genuine — that you truly have no estate — you can still do something to show mercy to the poor. You can sympathize with them, pray for them,

and speak words of encouragement to them. Isaiah 40:2: "Speak kindly to Jerusalem." If you can give no gold, you can speak a word in season — which may be like apples of gold in settings of silver. Beyond that, you can help the poor by stirring up others who do have means to help them. Wind cannot feed a hungry man directly, but it can fill the sails of a mill and grind corn for people's use. In the same way, even if you have no estate yourself, you can encourage others to give. You can fill the sails of their compassion and move them to show mercy — and so help your neighbor through them.

Having answered these objections, let me press the appeal to mercifulness further. I will now lay out several arguments which I hope will be weighed seriously by reason and conscience.

Argument 1: To do good to others is the great purpose of our creation. Ephesians 2:10: "Created in Christ Jesus for good works." Every creature fulfills the purpose it was made for — the star shines, the bird sings, the plant bears fruit. The purpose of life is to serve. The person who fails to be useful cannot enjoy the happiness he was made for. Many people, said Seneca, have lived long in the world but have never truly lived — they have done no good. A person who is of no use to anyone is fit only to take up space, and because he is barren of fruit, he will be full of curses (Hebrews 6:8).

Argument 2: By showing mercy we become like God, who is a God of mercy. He is said to delight in mercy (Micah 7:18). "The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works" (Psalm 145:9). He returns good for evil — like clouds that receive foul vapors from the earth and return them as sweet rain. There is no creature alive that does not taste of God's mercies. But human beings and angels taste them in a special and more concentrated way.

First, consider what temporal mercies you have received! Every breath you draw carries mercy with it. Every piece of bread you eat is carved to you by the hand of mercy. You never drink but from a golden cup of mercy.

Second, what spiritual mercies God has lavished on some of you — pardoning mercy, adopting mercy, saving mercy! The full picture of God's mercy can never be drawn. You cannot measure its breadth, for it is infinite. You cannot measure its height, for it reaches beyond the clouds. You cannot measure its length, for it is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 103:17). The works of mercy are the glory of the Godhead. Moses prayed, 'Lord, show me Your glory' (Exodus 33:18). God replied, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you' (verse 19). God considers Himself most glorious when clothed in the robes of His mercy. By showing mercy, then, we come to resemble the God of mercy. Luke 6:36: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Argument 3: Giving to others is a form of sacrifice. Hebrews 13:16: "And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." When you are distributing to the poor, it is as if you are praying — as if you are worshipping God. There are two kinds of sacrifice — the atoning sacrifice (Christ's blood) and the thanksgiving sacrifice (almsgiving). This, said the godly Richard Greenham, is more pleasing to God than any other sacrifice we can offer. Acts 10:4: The angel said to Cornelius, 'Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.' The backs of the poor are the altar on which this sacrifice is to be offered.

Argument 4: We ourselves live on the generosity of others. Every creature freely contributes to our needs. The sun does not shine for itself but for us. The earth produces crops for our benefit. One creature gives us wool, another oil, another silk. We are all beggars before creation. Shall every creature exist for the good of humanity, and humanity alone exist only for itself? How unreasonable and absurd this is!

Argument 5: We are called to generosity by virtue of belonging to one another. Isaiah 58:7: "Do not hide yourself from your own flesh." The poor are made of the same clay as we are — they are fellow members of the same body. The members of a body, by a natural law of mutual care, contribute to one another. The eye brings light, the heart brings blood, the head brings energy. A limb that does not contribute to the rest is a dead limb. The same is true in the wider community. It would be a shame if a hand were cut off for refusing to pull a thorn out of the foot. It is recorded to the honor of the empress of Theodosius the Great that she personally visited the sick and prepared relief for them with her own hands.

Argument 6: We are not the owners of our estates — we are stewards of them. How soon may we hear those words, 'Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward' (Luke 16:2)? An estate is a talent to invest for the Master's benefit. It is as dangerous to bury your talent as it is to squander it (Matthew 25:25-30). If the greedy man holds his gold too long, it will begin to rust — and the rust of it will testify against him (James 5:3).

Argument 7: The examples of those renowned for their generosity and mercy.

First, our Lord Christ — the supreme example of generosity. He was no less rich in giving than in merit. The emperor Trajan once tore a strip from his own robe to bind a soldier's wounds. Christ did more — He tore His own flesh. He made a medicine of His body and blood to heal us. Isaiah 53:5: "By His scourging we are healed." Here is a pattern of generosity that has no parallel.

Second, the Jewish people are noteworthy in this area. It is a rabbinic observation that devout Jews give a tenth of their estate to the poor. They give so freely, said Philo the Jew, that they seem to expect some great return for their giving. If the Jews are this devoted to mercy — without a priest, without a temple, without the Messiah — how much more should we be, who confess faith in the blessed Messiah?

Third, consider examples from the ancient pagans. I have read of Titus Vespasian, who was so accustomed to giving that when he remembered he had given nothing on a particular day, he cried out, 'I have lost a day!' It is reported of some among the Turks that they employ servants specifically to seek out the poor and bring them relief. The Turks have a saying that if people truly understood what a blessed thing it is to give, rather than hold anything back they would give even some of their own flesh to help the poor. Should a Christian's faith produce less generosity than a Turk's beliefs?

Let all of this move you to acts of mercy.

When poor and desperate people — like the infant Moses — are lying in a basket of reeds, weeping and about to sink in the waters of affliction, be their rescuers. Pull them out of those waters with a generous hand. Let the nourishment of your mercy feed the poor.

Be like the trees of the sanctuary — providing both food and healing (Ezekiel 47:12). When souls are distressed and on the verge of collapse, let your generous care revive and restore them. Let others see the garments and coats you have made for the poor (Acts 9:39).

Argument 8: The sin of mercilessness. First, the unmerciful person is ungrateful — and what worse thing can be said? You to whom the Lord has given a prosperous estate — your cup runs over — yet you have a tight fist and will part with nothing for good purposes. Know that you are deeply ungrateful and unfit for human community. Scripture places these side by side: ungrateful, without natural affection (2 Timothy 3:2-3). God may repent having given such people their estates and say, as in Hosea 2:9: "I will take back My grain at harvest time... I will also take away My wool and My linen."

Second, the unmerciful person shows that he lacks love for Christ. Everyone wants to be thought of as loving Christ, and would be offended to have that love questioned. But do those who let Christ's members starve truly love Him? No — they love their money more than Christ, and fall under that fearful sentence (1 Corinthians 16:22).

Argument 9: The final argument I will use to press toward mercy is the reward that follows it. Giving to others is a glorious work, and let me assure you, it is not an unfruitful one. Whatever is given to the poor is given to Christ. Matthew 25:40: "To the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." The poor man's hand is Christ's treasury, and nothing placed there is lost. The text says the merciful will receive mercy. What do we need most? Is it not mercy — par-

doning, saving mercy? What do we long for most on our deathbeds? Is it not mercy? You who show mercy will find mercy. You who pour the oil of compassion on others, God will pour the golden oil of salvation on you (Matthew 7:2). The Shunammite woman showed kindness to the prophet, and received kindness from him in return (2 Kings 4) — she opened her home to him, and he raised her dead child back to life. Those who sow mercy will reap in kind — they shall receive mercy. Such is the sweetness and mercy in God's nature that He will not allow anyone to be the loser. No act of kindness shown to Him will go unnoticed or unrewarded. God will owe no man so much as a cup of cold water without repaying it — He will give a drink of Christ's own warm blood to refresh the soul. Hebrews 6:10: "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints." God's mercy is tender, pure, and rich. Mercy will follow the merciful and overtake him. He will be rewarded — first in this life, and then in the life to come.

First, the merciful person will be rewarded in this life. He will be blessed in three ways.

First, in his own person. Psalm 41:1: "How blessed is he who considers the helpless." Wherever he goes, a blessing goes with him. He is in God's favor.

Second, blessed in his name. Psalm 112:6: "He will be remembered forever." While the miser's name rots away, the merciful person's name will be preserved with honor — giving off its fragrance like the finest wine.

Third, blessed in his estate. Proverbs 11:25: "The generous man will be prosperous." He will enjoy the richness of the earth and the blessing of heaven.

Fourth, blessed in his descendants. Psalm 37:26: "He is gracious and lends; his descendants are a blessing." He will not only leave behind an estate — he will leave behind a blessing, and God will see that this blessing is passed on and not cut off.

Fifth, blessed in his undertakings. Deuteronomy 15:10: "The Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all you undertake." The merciful person will be blessed in his building, his planting, and his traveling — in whatever he does, a blessing will pour out on him. He will be a prosperous person. The honeycomb of blessing will keep dripping on him.

Sixth, blessed with long life. Psalm 41:2: "The Lord will protect him and keep him alive." He has helped keep others alive — and God will keep him alive. Is anything lost by being merciful? Mercy spins out the silver thread of life. Many are cut short because of their mercilessness. Because their hearts are pinched, their lives are shortened.

Second, the merciful person will be rewarded in the life to come. God will reward the merciful not because of their works, but in accordance with them. Revelation 20:12: "And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened... and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds." Just as God has a bottle to collect our tears, He has a book to record our acts of mercy. Just as God will cover His people's sins with a veil, so He will, in His free grace, set a crown upon their good works. The way

to lay up treasure is to give it away. The rest of our estate stays behind when we die, but what is given to Christ's poor is stored in heaven. This is the blessed nature of such giving — though it makes the purse lighter, it makes the crown heavier.

You who are inclined toward mercy, remember this about every act of generosity you make.

First, you will have the best security possible. Ecclesiastes 11:1; Luke 6:38; Proverbs 19:17: "One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed." God Himself gives His bond to make you whole — better security than any human guarantee. And yet here is our unbelief: we will not take God's bond. We tend to file our acts of mercy among our lost investments.

Second, you will be repaid with abundance. For a piece of gold you gave away, you will receive a weight of glory. For a cup of cold water, you will receive rivers of pleasure flowing at God's right hand forever. The interest will infinitely exceed the principal. Pliny writes of a region in Africa where for every bushel of seed sown the people receive a hundred and fifty times the yield. For every small offering you place in Christ's treasury, you will receive more than a thousandfold in return. Your harvest of glory will be so vast that you will never finish bringing it in, no matter how long you reap. Let all of this move wealthy people to honor the Lord with their resources.

Some guidelines for showing mercy well.

Before I close this subject, let me briefly set out some principles for acts of mercy.

Rule 1: Charity must be given freely. Deuteronomy 15:10: "You shall give generously to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give" — that is, you must not be pained at parting with your money. Giving reluctantly is not truly giving — it is paying a tax, not offering a gift. Charity should flow like spring water: let the heart be the spring, the hand the pipe, and the poor the cistern. God loves a cheerful giver. Do not give to the poor as if you were handing over your wallet at knifepoint. Giving without eagerness is more like paying a fine than making an offering — more like doing penance than giving alms. Charity should flow like myrrh dripping from the tree — without being cut or forced.

Rule 2: We must give what is genuinely ours. Isaiah 58:7: "Share your bread with the hungry" — it must come from your own bread. The Syriac word for alms means 'justice,' indicating that charitable giving must come from what is honestly obtained. Scripture puts them together (Micah 6:8): to do justice and to love mercy. We must not offer sacrifices from stolen goods. Isaiah 61:8: "For I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering." A person who builds a charity house or hospital with ill-gotten wealth is not displaying generosity — he is displaying pride and raising a monument to his own shame.

Rule 3: Do everything in Christ and for Christ.

First, do everything in Christ — make sure that you yourself are united to Christ. We are accepted in Him (Ephesians 1:6). Origen, Chrysostom, and Peter Martyr all affirm that even the best works, if they do not spring from faith, are worthless. The Pelagians thought they had stumped Augustine by asking whether it was sinful for a pagan to clothe the naked. Augustine answered rightly: the act of doing good is not in itself evil, but when it proceeds from

unbelief it becomes so. Titus 1:15: "To those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure." The sweetest and most genuine fruit grows on the vine itself (John 15:4). Outside of Christ, all our acts of charity are merely wild olive fruit — not true good works but dead ones.

Second, do everything for Christ — that is, out of love for Him, as a way of showing that love. Love ripens and enriches our acts of mercy and makes them a precious offering to God. As Mary brought her ointments and spices out of love to anoint Christ's dead body, so out of love for Christ, bring your offerings and anoint His living body — that is, His people and members.

Rule 4: Works of mercy must be done in humility — set aside all display. The worm breeds in the finest fruit; the moth attacks the finest cloth. Pride will creep into even our best deeds. Beware of this dead fly in the ointment. When Moses's face shone, he covered it with a veil. In the same way, while your light shines before others and they see your good works, cover yourself with the veil of humility. As the silkworm weaves its intricate thread while hidden inside the silk and unseen, so we should hide ourselves from pride and the craving for recognition.

This was the sin of the Pharisees — when they gave, they blew a trumpet (Matthew 6:2). They were not truly giving alms but selling them for applause. A proud person casts his bread on the waters the way a fisherman casts a line — he is fishing for praise. I have read of Cosmus Medicis, a wealthy citizen of Florence, who confessed to a close friend that all the magnificent buildings he had funded and all the money he had spent on scholars and libraries had not come from any love of learning — he did it to erect monuments to his own fame and glory. A humble soul denies himself —

he even annihilates himself in his own eyes. He thinks how little he can do for God, and that even if he could do more, it would still be nothing but a debt already owed. So he looks on all his works as if he had done nothing. The saints at the last day are shown disowning their own acts of charity (Matthew 25:37): 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You?' A good Christian empties not only his hand of alms but his heart of pride. While he lifts the poor out of the dust, he places himself in the dust. Works of mercy should be like the cassia — a sweet spice, but low-growing.

Rule 5: Give wisely. Scripture says of the merciful person that he conducts his affairs with good judgment (Psalm 112:5). There is real wisdom in distinguishing between those who have brought poverty on themselves and those who have been brought into poverty by God's providence. Wisdom in giving takes two forms.

1. Finding the right recipient. 2. Choosing the right timing.

1. Finding the right recipient involves two considerations. First, give to those in the greatest need. Repair the fence where it is lowest; feed the lamp that is nearly out. Second, give to those who can potentially do the most good with your help. You might invest care and resources in a weak plant, but not in a dead one. Develop those who can help build up the house of Israel (Ruth 4:11) — people who can become pillars of church and community, not burdens that make your generosity seem wasted.

2. Wisdom in giving also involves choosing the right time. Give while you are healthy and prosperous. Share your resources with the poor before the silver cord is severed or the golden bowl is broken (Ecclesiastes 12:6). He who gives promptly gives twice. Let your own hands be your executors — do not do what some do,

holding everything back until life is nearly over. What is given at death is not truly given away — it is simply taken by death. That is not charity but necessity. Do not be so married to your money that only death can separate you from it. Do not be like the medlar fruit, which is only good when it has rotted. A greedy person is like a collection box — he takes money in but lets none out until death breaks the box apart and the coins come tumbling out. Give while you are alive and well. These are the gifts God notices — the ones Calvin says He enters into His own book of accounts.

Rule 6: Give thankfully. The person who gives should be more grateful than the one who receives. We ought (says Nazianzene) to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God that we are among those who can give, and not among those who must receive. Thank God for a willing heart. To have not only an estate but a heart for giving is itself a cause for gratitude.

CHAPTER 16



Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Describing purity of heart.

The holy God, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, calls here for purity of heart. To those adorned with this jewel, He promises a glorious, beatific vision of Himself — they shall see God. Two things need to be explained.

First, the nature of purity. Second, the seat of purity.

First, the nature of purity. Purity is something sacred and refined — it stands directly against filthiness and everything that defiles. We must distinguish different kinds of purity. First, there is a purity that belongs to God originally and essentially — as light belongs to the sun. Holiness is the glory of the Godhead (Exodus 15:11). God is the pattern and source of all holiness.

Second, there is a created purity — holiness is found in the angels and was once found in Adam. Adam's heart had not the slightest spot or taint of impurity. We call wine pure when it contains no adulterant, and gold pure when it contains no alloy. This is what

Adam's holiness was like — like wine fresh from the grape, unmixed. But this level of purity is not found on earth now. For that, we must go to heaven.

Third, there is a Gospel purity — the state in which grace is mixed with some remaining sin — like gold in raw ore, like light in the twilight, like wine with a few impurities, like fine cloth with a rough edge, like Nebuchadnezzar's image — part silver and part clay (Daniel 2:35). This mixture God calls purity in a Gospel sense, much as a face may be called beautiful even when it has a few freckles. Where there is a pursuit of purity and a grief over one's impurity, this is what it means to be pure in heart.

Some interpret 'pure in heart' as referring to chastity; others understand it as sincerity (Psalm 32:2). But I believe purity here is meant in a broader sense — referring to the various kinds and degrees of holiness. Those who are pure are consecrated persons on whom the oil of grace has been poured. This purity is commonly misunderstood.

First, moral respectability is not purity. A person may be clothed with moral virtues — justice, prudence, self-control — and still go to hell.

Second, religious profession is not purity. A person may have a name for being alive while actually being dead (Revelation 3:1). He may be swept clean by respectable behavior and decorated by religious profession, yet the devil may still dwell in the house. A blazing comet is not a star. The hypocrite's tongue may be silver, yet his heart may be stone. True purity consists in two things: first, a right mind — valuing holiness in one's convictions (Psalm 119:30);

second, a willing heart — embracing holiness in one's affections (Psalm 119:97). A pure soul is cast in the mold of holiness. Holiness is the blood that runs in its veins.

Second, the seat of purity: the heart. Purity of heart does not exclude purity of life, any more than a clean spring excludes a clean stream. But it is called purity of heart because this is the heart of religion — there can be no purity of life without it. A Christian's greatest concern should be to keep the heart pure, just as one would be especially careful to keep a spring from being poisoned. In a fight, a person guards the heart above all else. A wise Christian should with the same priority keep his heart pure. Take care that love of sin does not gain entry there — it could prove fatal.

Doctrine: Christians should above all things pursue purity of heart. 1 Timothy 3:9: "Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." Justification is the cause of our happiness; sanctification is its evidence.

The reasons for purity, and the reasons why purity must especially be in the heart.

The reasons for purity: First, purity is called for in Scripture. 1 Peter 1:16: "Be holy, for I am holy." It is not only the minister who calls you to holiness — God Himself calls for it. What would a holy God do with unholy servants? Second, purity matters because of the filthy and cursed condition we are in before purity is worked in us. We are a mixture of clay and sin. Sin does not only blind us — it defiles us. It is called 'filthiness' (James 1:21), compared to a plague sore (1 Kings 8:38), to spots (Deuteronomy 32:5), to vomit (2 Peter 2:22), to an infant lying in blood (Ezekiel 16:6), and to a

soiled cloth (Isaiah 30:22). All the ceremonial washings God appointed were simply to remind people of how unclean they were before being washed in the blood of Christ. If all the evils in the world were compressed together and their essence distilled, they could not produce anything as dark and defiled as sin. A sinner is a devil wearing a human face. When Moses's rod turned into a snake, he fled from it. If God were to open people's eyes and show them their own deformity and deadly corruption, they would be terrified and want to flee from themselves. When grace comes, it washes away this hellish filth. Of Ethiopians it makes Israelites. It turns ravens into swans. Those who were as black as hell it makes white as snow.

Third, only the pure in heart have a share in the covenant of grace. Those who are in the covenant receive the sprinkling of clean water (Ezekiel 36:25). Until we have been so sprinkled, we have no claim on the new covenant — and therefore no claim on the New Jerusalem. If a will is drawn up for people with certain qualifications, only those who meet those qualifications can receive what the will promises. God has drawn up a will and covenant to be our God and to give us heaven as our inheritance — but with this condition written in: that we be purified persons, sprinkled with clean water. Until that condition is met, we have no claim on God or on His mercy.

Fourth, purity is the end goal of our election. Ephesians 1:4: "He chose us... that we would be holy" — not because of holiness, but with holiness as the aim. Romans 8:29: "Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son." God predestines us to bear Christ's image — which

consists in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:24). Until you are holy, you cannot show any evidence of election. What shows instead is the devil's mark.

Fifth, purity is the purpose of our redemption. If we could have gone to heaven in our sins, Christ need not have died. Why did He shed His blood but to redeem us from an empty way of life (1 Peter 1:18-19)? Titus 2:14: "Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession." Christ shed His blood to wash away our filth. The cross was both an altar and a fountain. Jesus Christ died not only to save us from wrath (1 Thessalonians 1:10) but to save us from sin (Matthew 1:21). From His side came water — signifying our cleansing — as well as blood — signifying our justification (1 John 5:6). It would make a monstrosity of Christ's body if the Head were pure while the members were not.

Second, why purity must above all be in the heart. First, because without inner purity, our holiness is no different from the Pharisees'. The Pharisees' holiness consisted mainly in outward behavior — it was a surface purity. They never paid attention to the inside of the heart. Matthew 23:25: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence." Verse 27: "You are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones." The Pharisees were good only on the surface — not genuinely white but whitewashed, like a rotten post painted red. We must go further — we must be pure in heart, like the king's daughter, all glorious within (Psalm 45:13). Otherwise ours is only a Pharisaical purity,

and Christ says (Matthew 5:20): "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Second, the heart must especially be kept pure because the heart is the primary place where God chooses to dwell. God lives in the heart — He takes up residence there (Isaiah 57:15; Ephesians 3:17). Therefore it must be pure and holy. A king's palace must be kept clean, especially the room where the king is present. The heart is God's throne room — how holy should it be? If the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), the heart is the Holy of Holies. Take care not to defile the room where God comes to dwell. Let it be washed with holy tears.

Third, the heart must be especially pure because the heart sanctifies everything we do. When the heart is holy, everything is holy — our desires holy, our duties holy. The altar sanctified the gift; the heart is the altar that sanctifies the offering. The Romans carefully guarded their water springs from being poisoned. The heart is the spring of all our actions. Let us keep this spring free from poison. Be pure in heart.

Showing the true beauty of the soul.

Use 1: Here we see what makes a soul beautiful in God's eyes — purity of heart. However outwardly attractive you may be, you are a spiritual leper until you are pure in heart. God is drawn to the pure heart because He sees His own likeness reflected there. Holiness is a ray of God Himself — it is the glory of the angels. Take purity from an angel and he is no longer an angel but a devil. You who are pure in heart carry the angels' glory shining within you — you bear the embroidery and handiwork of the Holy Spirit.

The pure heart is God's paradise, where He delights to walk. It is His lesser heaven. The dove lives in the cleanest air. The Holy Spirit, who descended in the likeness of a dove, delights in the purest soul. God says of the pure in heart what He says in Psalm 132:14: "This is My resting place forever; here I will dwell." God loves the fairest appearance. The pure in heart is Christ's bride, adorned and glittering with the jewels of holiness. Song of Solomon 4:9: "You have made my heart beat faster with a single glance of your eyes" — that is, your graces, which like a chain of pearls have drawn His heart to you. Of all hearts, God loves the pure heart best. You who shape yourself according to the mirror of the word and adorn the inner person of the heart are most precious in God's eyes. Though you may be dim-eyed like Leah or hobbling like Barzillai, yet being pure in heart, you are a vision of beauty. Isaiah 49:5: "Yet I am honored in the sight of the Lord." How greatly this should increase our love for purity! This is a beauty that never fades — and it is what makes God Himself fall in love with us.

That Christians must not settle for outward purity.

Since we must be pure in heart, we must not be satisfied with outward purity alone. Decent behavior is not enough. A pig may be washed and still remain a pig. Respectability only washes a person on the outside; grace changes him. Respectability is like a star — it may shine in the eyes of the world, but it differs from true purity as much as crystal differs from diamond. Respectability is nothing more than putting flowers on a dead body. A person may become wonderfully well-behaved and still be nothing more than a tamed

devil. How many have made their good behavior their savior! Morality can damn as surely as vice. A ship can sink under a cargo of gold just as easily as under a load of garbage.

First, the outwardly moral person, while he avoids obvious sins, is insensitive to the sins of the heart. He does not detect the law of sin at work within him (Romans 7:23). Unbelief, hardness of heart, and vain thoughts do not trouble him. He despises sins that lead to prison but is unbothered by sins that grieve the Spirit.

Second, the outwardly moral person has a secret resistance to true religion. His heart rises up against genuine holiness. A snake may be beautiful in color but carry a deadly sting. The outwardly moral person may look attractive but harbors a secret aversion to the ways of God. He dislikes genuine grace as much as open vice. Zeal for God is as repulsive to him as immorality. Outward respectability is therefore not enough. The heart must be pure. God required Aaron to wash the inner parts of the sacrifice (Leviticus 9). Respectability only washes the outside — the inner parts must be washed. Blessed are the pure in heart.

Showing the signs of an impure heart.

Let us test ourselves: are we pure in heart or not? I will show the signs of, first, an impure heart, and second, a pure heart.

First, an ignorant heart is an impure heart. To be ignorant of sin or of Christ is a sign of impurity. Nahash the Ammonite agreed to make a treaty with the men of Jabesh-Gilead only on the condition that he could gouge out their right eyes (1 Samuel 11:2). Satan does something similar — he leaves people their left eye, meaning they can be sharp-sighted about worldly things, but their right eye of spiritual knowledge is put out entirely (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Ignorance is Satan's stronghold (Acts 26:18). The devils are bound in chains of darkness (Jude 6), and so are all ignorant people. It is impossible for an ignorant heart to be good. Knowledge is what makes the heart good. Proverbs 19:2: "Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge." To claim that your heart is good while your mind is ignorant makes as much sense as claiming your eyes are good while you are blind. In the Mosaic law, when the plague of leprosy was found in a person's head, the priest pronounced him unclean. That is the condition of the ignorant person — the leprosy is in his head. Grace cannot reign where ignorance reigns. An ignorant person cannot love God — you cannot desire what you do not know. He cannot have faith, because knowledge must come before faith (Psalm 9:10). He cannot worship God rightly (John 4:22). Ignorance is the root of sin; blindness leads to depravity (Ephesians 4:18-19). Ignorance is the mother of pride (Revelation 3:17) and the cause of error (2 Timothy 3:6). Worst of all is willful ignorance — there is a significant difference between not knowing and refusing to know. Many people embrace ignorance; they cling to their disease (Job 21:14; 2 Peter 3:5). Ignorant minds are impure minds. No one travels to heaven in the dark.

Second, the heart that sees no need of purity is itself impure. Revelation 3:17: "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." To be unaware of your own disease is worse than the disease itself. Some people think they need no repentance (Luke 15:7) — some sinners are too comfortable to seek a cure. Heart-purity is as great a mystery to a natural person as the new birth was to Nicodemus (John 3:4). It is a sobering thought how many people walk along confidently, congratulating themselves, never questioning their spiritual condition until it is too late.

Third, the person who cherishes sin in his heart has an impure heart. Psalm 66:18: "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear." The original word means "if I look upon sin" — that is, with a lingering, longing gaze. Cherishing sin is incompatible with purity of heart.

Question: What does it mean to cherish sin in the heart?

Answer 1: It means indulging sin — when sin not only lives in us but we live in sin. Some people will give up every sin but one. Jacob was willing to let all his sons go but Benjamin. Satan can hold a man with a single sin. A bird-catcher holds his bird securely by one wing or claw. Others hide their sins, like a shopkeeper who shuts his storefront windows but keeps his trade going inside. Many people deal with their sins the way Moses's mother dealt with him — she placed him in the basket of reeds as if she were leaving him, but her eyes never left him, and in the end she became his nurse (Exodus 2:9). In the same way, many people appear to abandon their sins while only hiding them from others. Their hearts still pursue those sins, and in the end they nurse and feed them.

Answer 2: To cherish sin is to take delight in it. A child of God, though he may sin, does not take pleasure in sin. Romans 7:15: "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate." But impure souls make sin their entertainment. 2 Thessalonians 2:12: "They took pleasure in wickedness." No one savors a favorite dish with more relish than a wicked person feeds on forbidden fruit. This delight reveals that the will is fully invested in the sin.

Answer 3: To cherish sin is to prepare and make provision for it. Romans 13:14: "Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." Sinners are, so to speak, caterers for their lusts — a word picture drawn from those who stock a household or supply a garrison. The Greek word here means to project and plan in the mind how to bring something about. Making provision for the flesh means studying how to satisfy physical desire and gathering fuel for lust. This is what Amnon did (2 Samuel 13:5) — he pretended to be sick so that his sister Tamar would come nurse him and cook for him, which gave him the opportunity to assault her. It is a grievous thing when a person's concern is not to quiet his conscience but to satisfy his lust.

Answer 4: To cherish sin is to welcome it and show it hospitality — just as Lot showed hospitality to the angels (Genesis 19:2), bowing with his face to the ground and saying, "Please, my lords, turn aside into your servant's house." When the Spirit of God comes, the sinner resists and grieves Him. But when temptation comes, the sinner bows to it, throws the gates open wide, and says, "Come in, my lord." This is what it means to cherish sin.

Answer 5: A person cherishes sin when he pays no attention to God's warnings against it. We read of seven thunders lifting their voices (Revelation 10:3). How many thunders in Scripture lift their voices against sin! Psalm 68:21: "Surely God will shatter the head of His enemies, the hairy crown of him who goes on in his guilty deeds." This is a thundering passage of Scripture — yet sinners are not afraid of this thunder. Let a minister come clothed with the spirit of Elijah and declare all the curses of God against people's sins — they pay no attention. They can laugh at a shaking spear (Job 41:29). This is to cherish sin, and it reveals an impure heart.

Fourth, an unbelieving heart is an impure heart. Scripture explicitly calls it "an evil heart of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:12). An unbelieving heart is evil to the highest degree — it is filled with the poison of hell. Unbelief is the root and breeding ground of all sin.

First, unbelief is a sin that directly insults God. It calls God a liar, putting His power, mercy, and truth into question. 1 John 5:10: "The one who does not believe God has made Him a liar." Can any greater affront be hurled at the God of glory? Second, unbelief drives us to trust in secondary causes, which means placing the creature in the position that belongs to God. 2 Chronicles 16:12: "In his disease Asa did not seek the Lord, but the physicians." He trusted the physician more than God. Saul turned to the witch of Endor. What an insult it is to lean on a broken reed and ignore the Rock of Ages!

Second, unbelief hardens the heart. These two sins are linked together (Mark 16:14): Jesus rebuked the disciples for their unbelief and hardness of heart. Unbelief produces a heart of stone. The person who does not believe God's warnings will never fear Him. The person who does not believe God's promises will never love Him. What is said of Leviathan applies equally to the unbeliever (Job 41:24): "His heart is as hard as a stone." Unbelief first corrupts the heart, and then hardens it.

Third, unbelief breeds hypocrisy. Those who do not believe God is a jealous God who will call them to account put on a mask of religion. They act like saints in public so they can live like devils in private. 2 Timothy 3:4-5: They maintain the outward form of godliness, but self is the idol they truly worship. Like boatmen, they look one direction and row another. The unbeliever is the greatest hypocrite.

Fourth, unbelief produces the fear of people. Fear is a degrading thing — it strips a person of courage and makes him afraid to do what is right. The fearful person studies how to please others rather than how to obey his conscience. Proverbs 29:25: "The fear of man brings a snare." What made Abraham tell half-truths, David feign madness, and Peter deny Christ? Was it not fear? And where does fear come from but from unbelief? This is why Scripture pairs them together (Revelation 21:8): the cowardly and the unbelieving.

Fifth, unbelief is the root of apostasy. Hebrews 3:12: "An evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God." Why do those who once seemed zealous now despise preaching and abandon prayer in their homes? Is it not their unbelief? They do not believe that God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). Unbelief is the cause of apostasy. Since unbelief breeds and feeds so much sin, the unbelieving heart must be an impure heart.

Fifth, a covetous heart is an impure heart. The earth is the most impure element. The purity of the heart lies in its spiritual orientation, and nothing is more opposed to the spiritual than earthliness. Covetousness is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

First, covetousness is the root of discontent. Why do people complain about their circumstances? Because they believe they do not have enough. The Greek word for covetousness means an immoderate craving to gain more. Covetousness is like a dry fever — and because the thirst is never satisfied, the heart festers with discontent and impatience.

Second, covetousness is the root of theft. Achan's greedy desire led him to steal the wedge of gold that effectively cut his soul off from God (Joshua 7:21).

Third, covetousness is the root of treason. It drove Judas to betray Christ (Matthew 26:15): "What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?" Absalom's covetousness drove him to try to snatch the crown from his own father's head. A person who acts like Demas will soon prove to be a Judas. 2 Timothy 3:2-3 lists covetousness among the sins of the last days, and in the very next verse lists betrayal alongside it. Where covetousness is in the premise, treason tends to follow in the conclusion.

Fourth, covetousness is the root of murder. Why did Ahab have Naboth stoned to death except to seize his vineyard (1 Kings 21:13)? Covetousness has driven many to wade through blood to reach a crown. And can the heart be pure when the hands are full of blood?

Fifth, covetousness is the root of perjury. 2 Timothy 3:2-3 lists covetousness alongside oath-breaking. For the love of money, people will swear a false oath and break a just one. He who lives like Midas will die a perjurer.

Sixth, covetousness is the root of sorcery. Why do people deal with the devil except for money? They study the dark arts in pursuit of gold. Alexander VI sold his soul to the devil for the papacy.

Seventh, it is the root of fraud and deceit in commerce. Those who are desperate to become wealthy will take advantage of others. It is the covetous hand that tips the scales (Amos 8:5).

Eighth, covetousness is the root of bribery and injustice — it turns courts of law into places of robbery, as Augustine observed. At Athens, legal cases were bought and sold for money.

Ninth, it is the cause of sexual immorality. Scripture speaks of the wages of a prostitute (Deuteronomy 23:18). For money, both conscience and chastity are put up for sale.

Tenth, covetousness is the root of idolatry. Colossians 3:5: "Greed, which amounts to idolatry." The covetous person bows down before the image of gold. Money is his god — he places his trust in it. Money is his creator: when he accumulates great wealth, he feels he has finally arrived. It is his redeemer: when he is in trouble, he runs to his money to save him. It is his comforter: when he is sad, he counts his coins, and this golden harp drives away the dark mood. When you see a covetous person, you are looking at an idolater.

Eleventh, covetousness is the cause of unresponsiveness to the means of grace. In the parable, the thorns choked the seed (Matthew 13:7). This is why preaching does so little good in so many hearts — the seed falls among thorns. Thousands of sermons lie buried in earthly hearts.

Twelfth, covetousness is the root of stinginess and meanness — it kills hospitality. A covetous person has a withered hand — he cannot stretch it out to clothe or feed those in need. The covetous person is so base that he is willing to let his reputation rot if only his estate grows. What a cursed sin greed is! Can the heart be pure when such a root of bitterness is growing in it? We might as well call wine pure when it runs thick with sediment, or a body healthy when it is covered with plague sores.

Sixth, those who hate purity have impure hearts. Micah 3:2: "You who hate good." Proverbs 1:29: "They hated knowledge." Some things in nature have a natural antipathy — serpents will not approach the branches of a wild ash tree. There is a similar antipathy in the heart of a worldly person against holiness. When this hatred hardens into active malice, it becomes dangerous. Julian the Apostate, for example, maliciously opposed Christianity, and when he received a fatal wound in battle, he threw a handful of his own blood into the air in contempt, crying out, "Galilean, have You overcome me?"

Seventh, the person who mocks purity has an impure heart. Luke 16:14; 2 Peter 3:3: "In the last days mockers will come." Some people treat religion as a joke. Scoffing at holiness is the mark of an Ishmael spirit. Are we not commanded to be perfect as God is perfect (Matthew 5:48)? It is astonishing that those who dare to openly ridicule holiness are not swallowed up as Korah and Dathan were. These are devils wearing flesh — damnation is written across their foreheads. Lucian, who had professed religion during the time of Emperor Trajan, later became so profane that he mocked Christians. After spending his life trying to tear religion apart with his ridicule, he was torn apart and devoured by dogs. When the mark of leprosy appeared, the person was to be put out of the camp (Leviticus 13:9). Those who mock religion, unless God grants them repentance, will certainly be shut out of the camp of heaven.

Showing the signs of a pure heart.

Now let us consider the signs of a pure heart.

First, a sincere heart is a pure heart. Psalm 32:2: "In whose spirit there is no deceit." A sincere-hearted Christian has four distinguishing characteristics. A sincere heart serves God with the whole heart.

First characteristic: he serves God from the heart. The hypocrite makes only a show of obedience. Jeremiah 12:2: "You are near to their lips but far from their mind." A person may have a fair complexion while his lungs are rotting. The hypocrite looks devout — he has a reverent expression but a hollow heart. The sincere person, by contrast, is better on the inside than the outside. In the law, God required that the inner parts of the sacrifice be offered up (Leviticus 4:11). A genuine Christian gives God the inner parts — when he prays, his heart prays. 1 Samuel 1:13: Hannah prayed in her heart. In his thanksgiving, the heart is the chief instrument of praise (Psalm 111:1). The sweetest worship is when we make melody in our hearts to the Lord (Colossians 3:16).

Second characteristic: the sincere Christian serves God with the whole heart (Psalm 119:2). Hypocrites have a divided heart (Psalm 12:2) — part for God, part for sin (Hosea 10:2). Their heart is split. God loves a broken heart, but not a divided one. A sincere heart is a whole heart — the full current of the affections flows toward God. The sincere person follows God fully (Numbers 14:24).

Third characteristic: a sincere heart is willing to be examined. Psalm 139:23: "Search me, O God, and know my heart." Any metal that its owner is afraid to bring to the assayer is suspicious. A sound heart welcomes the testing of God's Word and values preaching that searches the heart. Hypocrites flee from the light that would expose their sin. They despise the medicine of the Word

that, when it meets their spiritual sickness, begins to trouble their conscience. A gracious soul loves best the preaching that performs heart surgery.

Fourth characteristic: a sincere heart refuses to act against conscience, even in small things. He is bold as a lion yet deeply afraid of sin (Proverbs 28:1; Genesis 39:9). He will not build an estate through sinful means or rise at another person's expense. Jacob obtained his father's blessing through deception — but that is not the way to obtain God's blessing.

Fifth characteristic: a sincere heart is suspicious of itself. The hypocrite suspects others while thinking well of himself. The sincere Christian thinks charitably of others while questioning himself. He regularly calls himself to account: "O my soul, do you have any evidence for heaven? Are you seeking your own comfort when you should be showing the fruit of grace? Is there no flaw in your evidence? You may be mistaking common grace for saving grace. Weeds in a cornfield look like flowers. The foolish virgins' lamps looked as if they had oil. O my soul, is that not your situation?" The sincere soul, ever watchful, acts as his own critic. He examines matters in the court of his conscience as though he were about to be summoned before God's judgment seat. This is what it means to be pure in heart.

Second sign of a pure heart: a pure heart breathes after purity. If God were to extend the golden scepter and say, "Ask what you will, even half the kingdom," the pure heart would say, "Lord, give me a pure heart. Let my heart bear the inscription, 'Holiness to the Lord.' Let my heart be Your temple — come and dwell in it. Lord,

what would I do in heaven with this unholy heart? What fellowship could I have with God or angels?" A gracious soul is so in love with purity that he prizes a pure heart above every other blessing.

First, he prizes it above riches. He knows that a person may be clothed in purple and fine linen and still go to hell. He is content to be poor, as long as he can be pure. He knows that purity of heart is a special mark of God's love — the pure in heart shall see God.

Second, he prizes purity above spiritual gifts. Gifts do not raise our standing in God's eyes — a pure heart is the jewel. Matthew 15:28: "O woman, your faith is great!" It was not her eloquent words that moved Christ, but her faith. Hypocrites have had remarkable gifts — Saul had the spirit of prophecy; Judas could no doubt deliver an impressive speech. There can be illumination without sanctification. A small diamond is worth more than a large piece of brass. A little grace is worth more than the most impressive natural gifts. If the deepest longing of your soul is for holiness — if you want a pure heart more than an eloquent tongue — then the oil of the Spirit has been poured on you, and you will be crowned with the sight of God.

Third sign of a pure heart: a pure heart detests all sin. A person may restrain or even abandon sin without having a pure heart.

A person may restrain sin the way a diver holds his breath underwater — only to breathe again when he surfaces. A person may hold back from sin for three reasons. First, for lack of opportunity — gunpowder makes no noise until fire is applied; a clock stands still until the weights are attached. But let a temptation come — like hanging on the weights — and the heart rushes into sin just as before. Second, a person may hold back from sin out of fear. Just

as someone avoids a dish he craves because he fears it will make him sick, there is a conflict in the sinner between desire and fear. Desire urges him toward sin, but fear acts as a bit to rein him in. Even so, what he fears is not the serpent's crookedness but its sting. Third, a person may hold back from sin because it would ruin his plans. How well-behaved Joash was while Jehoiada the priest was alive! Both prudence and conscience can restrain a person from sin.

A person may also abandon sin without having a pure heart. To abandon sin is no small thing — sin is so dear to people that they will sacrifice their children for the sake of their sins (Micah 6:7). Sin is the Delilah that bewitches, so it is significant when people are freed from it. One fruit of preaching is that it civilizes people — it produces outward reform. But sin can be abandoned for wrong reasons. First, from moral conviction: ethical arguments can suppress sin. I have read of a debauched pagan who, after hearing Socrates lecture on virtue and vice, walked away changed and never returned to his former excesses. Cato, Seneca, and Aristides saw beauty in virtue and lived respectable lives. Second, from self-interest: a person may abandon sin not out of any regard for God's glory but to protect his own reputation. Vice wastes an estate and shames a family, so out of self-interest he divorces his sin. Third, from necessity: perhaps he can no longer pursue the sin. The adulterer has grown old; the drunkard has grown poor. His heart still inclines toward sin, but either his money or his strength has run out. The person who stops sinning out of necessity has not so much forsaken sin as sin has forsaken him.

But the person who is pure in God's eyes is the one who detests sin. Psalm 119:104: "I hate every false way." This is excellent, because it means the love of sin has been crucified. A hypocrite may leave sin while still loving it — like a serpent that sheds its skin but keeps its venom. But when a person can say he detests sin, sin has been killed at the root. A pure heart avoids sin the way a person avoids a dish that repulses him. This is the mark of a new nature — when a person hates what he once loved. And because he hates sin, he fights against it with the sword of the Spirit, just as a person who hates a serpent works to destroy it.

Fourth sign: a pure heart avoids even the appearance of evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:22: "Abstain from every form of evil." A pure heart avoids what could even be interpreted as evil. A loyal subject not only avoids treason but steers clear of anything that looks like treason. A gracious heart is cautious about anything that resembles sin. When Joseph's master's wife grabbed him and said, "Lie with me," he left his garment in her hand and ran (Genesis 39:12). He avoided the appearance of evil — he would not even be seen in her company. A pure heart avoids whatever carries the suspicion of sin.

First reason: because the appearance of evil often becomes the occasion for evil. Inappropriate flirtation has the appearance of evil and often leads to it. If Joseph had allowed himself to be familiar with his master's wife in a careless, playful way, he might eventually have been drawn into sin with her. Some people, out of curiosity, have gone to hear false teaching and come home with error lodged in their minds. When Dinah went out wandering, she lost her chastity (Genesis 34:2). A pure heart foresees the danger and avoids the appearance of evil. It is dangerous to approach a

hornet's nest. The soldiers who went too close to the furnace were burned (Daniel 3:22). Second reason: because the appearance of evil can damage a person's good name. A good name is a precious ointment, worth more than fine gold (Proverbs 22:1). It commends us to God and to other believers in ways that riches cannot. A godly person avoids the appearance of evil to guard his good name.

A pure heart avoids even the shadow of sin out of reverence for God's holiness. God hates the very appearance of evil. He despises hypocrites because they have nothing more than the outward appearance of goodness. And He is displeased with His own children when they carry even the appearance of evil. A gracious heart knows that God is a jealous God who cannot endure His people skirting the edge of sin. So the pure heart keeps well back and will not draw near the smell of infection.

Third, a pure heart avoids the appearance of sin out of concern for other believers. The appearance of evil can cause a weaker brother to stumble. A gracious heart is careful not only to keep his own conscience clean but to avoid offending another believer's conscience. Even in matters that are neutral, if something has the appearance of evil and might grieve another, we should hold back. When we sin against fellow believers and wound their weak conscience, we sin against Christ (1 Corinthians 8:12). The weaker Christian is a member of Christ, and so sinning against that member is sinning against Christ.

Fourth, a pure heart avoids even the appearance of evil out of concern for unbelievers. The apostle calls us to live wisely in the sight of outsiders (1 Thessalonians 4:12). The wicked are watching for us to stumble — how eager they would be to find something to use against religion! Believers are placed like stars in the highest

sphere of the church. Any hint of irregular behavior gives the wicked fresh ammunition to attack religion. To a godly heart, the reputation and honor of the gospel is so precious that he would rather die than do anything to tarnish it. By this sign, let us test ourselves — do we truly have pure hearts? Do we avoid even the least appearance of sin? Sadly, many people rush into situations that are fuel and temptation for sin — they practically invite the devil to tempt them. Some frequent places that are breeding grounds for lust. Others attend gatherings where error is taught, and God in just judgment often allows those who do not avoid the appearance of sin to fall into the act of sin itself. Psalm 106:35: "They mingled with the nations and learned their practices." Pure hearts flee occasions of sin. John refused to share a public bath with the heretic Cerinthus. Polycarp would not hold any conversation with Marcion the heretic. Basil said that Christians in his day avoided the meetings of sectarians as they would avoid schools of error. Avoid the appearance of evil. The apostle commands us to pursue whatever things are of good report (Philippians 4:8).

Fifth sign: a pure heart performs holy duties in a holy manner. This holy manner, or proper order, consists of three things.

First, preparing the heart before a duty. An unholy heart has no concern about how it rushes into an act of worship — it comes without preparation and leaves without profit. The pure heart is a prepared heart. It readies itself before entering a duty through self-examination and brief prayer. When the ground is prepared, it is ready to receive seed. When an instrument is tuned, it is ready to make music.

Second, watching the heart during a duty. A holy heart works to feel and be moved — his heart burns within him. There was no sacrifice without fire. A pure saint labors to have his heart broken open in worship. Psalm 51:17 teaches that a broken and contrite heart is what God prizes — and broken incense gives off the sweetest fragrance. Impure souls have no concern about how coldly and perfunctorily they serve God (Ezekiel 33:31). They pray more out of habit than out of faith. They are no more moved by an act of worship than the stone tombs in a churchyard. God complains about people offering the blind in sacrifice (Malachi 1:8) — and is it not just as bad to offer the dead? Christian, ask yourself: "How can this deadness of heart coexist with purity of heart? Do not dead things rot?"

Third, outward reverence in worship. Purity of heart will express itself through reverent posture — lifting the eyes and hands, removing the head covering, and bending the knee. The Emperor Constantine showed great reverence for the Word of God. When God gave the law, the mountain blazed with fire and shook (Exodus 19:18) so that the people would prostrate themselves before the Lord with deeper awe. The ark containing the law was carried on poles so the Levites could not touch it (Exodus 25:11-14), showing the reverence God requires toward holy things. Sitting through prayer — except in cases of weakness — and keeping one's head covered during prayer is an unbecoming, irreverent practice. Those who do so should reform it. We must offer not only our souls but our bodies to God (Romans 12:1). The Lord takes notice of the posture and manner we adopt in His worship. If a man were presenting a petition to a king, would he hand it over with his hat half on? The careless irreverence of some worshipers makes it

seem as though they hardly care whether God hears them or not. We have swung from one extreme to the other — from superstition to rudeness. Christians should think about the dreadful majesty of the God who is present with them. Genesis 28:17: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." The holy angels cover their faces, crying, "Holy, holy" (Isaiah 6:1). A holy heart will produce a holy posture.

Sixth sign: a pure heart produces a pure life. 2 Corinthians 7:1: "Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Where there is a good conscience, there will be good conduct. Some people claim to thank God for having good hearts while their lives are evil. Proverbs 30:12: "There is a kind of man who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness." If the stream is corrupt, we may suspect the spring. Aaron was called the holy one of the Lord (Psalm 106:16). He not only had a holy heart — he also wore a golden plate on his forehead inscribed with the words "Holy to the Lord." Purity must not only be woven into the heart but engraved on the life. Grace is most beautiful when it shines outward with its golden beams. A clock has its mechanism within, but the hand also moves on the face. Purity of heart shows itself on the face of one's daily life.

First, a pure soul talks about God (Psalm 37:30). The heart is revealed in the tongue. The person who is pure in heart speaks of heavenly things.

Second, he walks with God (Genesis 6:9). He is always doing the work of angels — praising God, serving God — living as Christ lived on earth. Holy duties are the Jacob's ladder by which he is constantly ascending to heaven. Purity of heart and purity of life

are joined together in Scripture (Ezekiel 36:27): "I will put My Spirit within them" — there is purity of heart — "and they shall walk in My statutes" — there is purity of life. Can we truly call those people pure whose conduct belongs not in heaven but in hell? Micah 6:11: "Can I justify wicked scales and a bag of deceptive weights?" How rightly others reproach religion when they see it trampled underfoot by those who claim to follow it! A pure heart has a radiant face. Grace, like new wine, must come out — it can no more be hidden than light. The saints are called jewels (Malachi 3) because of the brilliance they display before the world (Philippians 3:20).

Seventh sign: a pure heart loves purity so deeply that nothing can draw him away from it.

First, let others mock purity — the pure heart loves it still. When David danced before the ark and Michal scorned him, he said: "If this is what it means to be humble, I will be yet more humble" (2 Samuel 6:22). A pure heart says the same: if pursuing holiness is what makes me look foolish, then I will look even more foolish. Just as water thrown on fire makes it burn brighter, the more others ridicule holiness, the more a gracious soul blazes with love and zeal for it. If a man had inherited a great fortune, would he let mockery talk him out of it? What does a Christian lose by another person's contempt? A blind man's dismissal of a diamond does not make it sparkle any less.

Second, let others persecute holiness — a pure heart will pursue it still. Holiness is the queen every gracious soul is pledged to, and he would rather die than be separated from her. Paul was committed to holiness even knowing that chains and hardships awaited him (Acts 20:23). The path of true religion is often thorny

and costly, but a gracious heart chooses inner purity over outward comfort. There is a story of a man who possessed a jewel he greatly prized. When the king sent for it, he replied: "I honor his majesty, but I would sooner lose my life than part with my jewel." The person enriched with the jewel of holiness feels the same way — he would rather die than surrender it. When his honor and riches are of no more use to him, his holiness will stand him in good stead (Romans 6:22): "You have your fruit resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life."

An exhortation to heart-purity.

Use 3: Let me urge Christians to pursue purity of heart. The adulterous woman wipes her mouth (Proverbs 30:20) — but that is not enough. "Wash your heart from evil, O Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 4:14). Here I will lay out some arguments to motivate us toward purity of heart.

First, purity of heart is necessary — necessary because:

First, in regard to ourselves: until the heart is pure, all our religious acts are polluted — they are merely splendid sins. To the unclean, all things are unclean (Titus 1:15). Their offerings are unclean. Under the law, if a man made ceremonially unclean by contact with a dead body carried holy meat in the fold of his garment, the holy meat could not cleanse him — instead, he defiled it (Haggai 2:12-13). A person with leprosy defiled everything he touched. If he had touched the altar or the sacrifice, the altar would not have cleansed him — he would have defiled the altar. A dirty hand contaminates the purest water. An impure heart defiles prayers and the sacraments — it drops poison into everything. A pure stream that runs through contaminated ground becomes pol-

luted. Even the holiest ordinances are tainted when they pass through an impure heart. A sinner's works are called dead works (Hebrews 6:1), and dead works cannot please God — just as a dead wife cannot please her husband.

Second, purity of heart is necessary in regard to God. God is holy — holiness is the chief robe He wears (Habakkuk 1:13). "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil" — and will this holy God endure an impure heart drawing near to Him? Would a person voluntarily place a viper in his own chest? The holy God and the sinner cannot dwell together. Only friends dwell together, and there is no friendship between God and the sinner — they are completely opposite in mind and disposition. An impure heart is more offensive to God than a serpent. God gave the serpent its venom, but Satan fills the heart with sin (Acts 5:3): "Why has Satan filled your heart?" The Lord recoils from the sinner who comes near Him while his spiritual sores are still running (Zechariah 11:8): "My soul detested them."

Third, purity of heart is necessary in regard to the angels, who are pure creatures. The cherubim, which represented the angels, were made of fine gold to signify the purity of their nature. No unholy thought ever enters the minds of angels. Therefore there must be purity of heart in us if there is to be any resemblance between us and them. What would unholy hearts be doing among those pure angelic spirits?

Fourth, purity of heart is necessary in regard to the glorified saints. They are pure, having been refined of every trace of sin. Their title is "spirits of righteous men made perfect" (Hebrews 12:23). What would defiled spirits be doing among spirits made perfect? I tell you — if those who wallow in sin could come near

God and the angels and the spirits of perfected believers and see their radiance, they would quickly want to flee from their presence. It would be like a filthy man in rags standing before a king and his nobles, clothed in gold and adorned with jewels. He would be ashamed of himself and wish to disappear.

Fifth, purity of heart is necessary in regard to heaven itself. Heaven is a pure place — an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1 Peter 1:4). No unclean creature entered Noah's ark, and nothing unclean will enter the heavenly city (Revelation 21:27). God will not pour the new wine of glory into a stale and impure heart. All of this shows just how necessary purity of heart is.

Second, it is God's will that we be pure in heart (1 Thessalonians 4:3): "This is the will of God, your sanctification." Are you struggling financially? Perhaps it is not God's will that you be wealthy — but it is certainly God's will that you be holy. Let God have His will by making you holy, and you will have your will in being made happy. God's will must either be fulfilled by us in obedience, or fulfilled upon us in judgment.

Third, purity of heart is the defining mark of God's people (Psalm 73:1): "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." Purity of heart marks us as belonging to God's Israel. It is not religious profession that makes us God's people — though it does distinguish us from the world. Not all who belong to Israel are truly Israel (Romans 9:6). Purity of heart is the jewel hung only around the necks of the elect. Just as chastity distinguishes a virtuous woman from one who is not, so the true saint is distinguished from the hypocrite by purity of heart. It is like the star or the order of the garter worn by a nobleman — a distinctive mark of honor

that sets him apart from the common person. When the shining star of purity is in a Christian's heart, it sets him apart from the merely nominal believer.

Fourth, purity of heart makes us like God. Adam's great sin was aspiring to be like God in knowledge. But we should aspire to be like God in holiness. God's image consists in holiness. Those who do not bear His image and likeness will hear Him say, "I never knew you." God delights only in a heart where He can see His own face and likeness. You cannot see your reflection in a dusty mirror. God's face cannot be seen in a dusty, impure soul. A pure heart, like a clean mirror, reflects something of God. There is little comfort in resembling God in other ways. We resemble God in having existence — but so do rocks. We resemble God in having movement — but so do the stars. We resemble God in having life — but so do trees and birds. We resemble God in having knowledge — but so do demons. The only resemblance to God that is truly comforting and blessed is resembling Him in purity. God loves the pure in heart — and love is grounded in likeness.

Fifth, the excellence of the heart lies in its purity. Purity was the glory of the soul in its original innocence. The purer a thing is, the better it is. The purer the air — the freer it is from harmful vapors — the healthier it is. Distilled water is more precious than ordinary water. The purer the gold, the more valuable it is. The purer the wine, separated from its sediment and dregs, the finer it is. In the same way, the more the soul is clarified by grace and lifted above the dregs of sin, the more precious it is in God's sight. The purer the heart, the more spiritual it is — and the more spiritual, the more fit to welcome the One who is Spirit.

Sixth, God is good to the pure in heart (Psalm 73:1): "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." Everyone desires God to be good to them — it is the sick man's prayer: "Lord, be good to me." And God is good to those who are pure in heart.

Question: But how is God good to them?

Answer: In two ways. First, to the pure in heart, all things are sanctified (Titus 1:15): "To the pure, all things are pure." Their estate is sanctified; their relationships are sanctified — just as the temple sanctified the gold, and the altar sanctified the offering. To the impure, nothing is clean. Their table is a snare; their religious worship is sin. A curse follows the wicked person, but holiness removes that curse and breaks its hold. To the pure, all things are pure. Second, the pure in heart have all things working together for their good (Romans 8:28). Blessings and trials both work for their benefit. Even the most toxic medicine becomes healing; even the most difficult providence advances their salvation. Who then would not want to be pure in heart? God is good to the pure in heart.

Seventh, purity of heart opens the way to heaven — the pure in heart shall see God. Happiness is nothing but the highest form of holiness. Purity of heart is heaven beginning in a person. Holiness is called in Scripture the anointing of God (1 John 2:27). Solomon was first anointed with holy oil, and then made king (1 Kings 1:39). In the same way, God's people are first anointed with the oil of the Spirit and made pure in heart — and then the crown of glory is placed on their heads. Is this not reason enough to highly value purity? It lays the groundwork for glory. Purity of heart and the sight of God are linked together.

Eighth, consider the examples of those who were outstanding in purity of heart. The Lord Jesus was the supreme example (John 8:46): "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" In this we are to imitate Christ — not in raising the dead or performing miracles, but in being holy (1 Peter 1:16). Beyond this golden example of Christ, we are to follow the pattern of those saints who have lived with a dove-like purity. David was so pure in heart that he was called a man after God's own heart. Abraham was so purified by faith that he was counted among God's closest confidants. Moses was so holy that God spoke with him face to face. And what were the rest of the patriarchs but flourishing plants of renown, growing in holiness? The fathers of the early church were famous for their purity. Gregory Nazianzene, Basil, and Augustine were so saturated with holiness that even their enemies could find nothing to charge them with. As Caesar wished he had soldiers like those in Alexander the Great's day, so we may wish we had saints like those of the early church — so honest in their dealings, so modest in their appearance, so faithful to their word, so devoted in their religion, so blameless in their lives, that they were living sermons, walking Bibles, true portraits of Christ, who helped preserve the credibility of godliness in the world.

Ninth, purity of heart is the only jewel you can carry out of this world. You may have a child you love dearly, or a great estate — but you can take nothing out of the world (1 Timothy 6:7). Purity of heart is the only possession you can carry with you in peace. It is what will last the longest — and we tend to love most what lasts longest. We prize a diamond or a piece of gold above the most beautiful flower precisely because the flower fades. Purity of heart has permanence — it will go with us beyond the grave.

Means for attaining purity of heart.

How can we attain purity of heart? First, look often into the Word of God (John 15:3): "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." Psalm 119:140: "Your word is very pure." God's Word is pure — not only in its content but in its effect, because it makes us pure. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17). By gazing into this pure mirror, we are changed into its likeness. The Word is both a mirror that shows us the stains on our souls and a basin that washes them away. It breathes nothing but purity — it illuminates the mind and consecrates the heart.

Second, go to the bath. There are two baths that Christians should wash in.

First, the bath of tears. Peter had stained and defiled himself with sin, and he washed himself with tears of repentance. Mary Magdalene, who had been a deeply sinful woman, stood at Jesus's feet weeping (Luke 7:38). Mary's tears washed her own heart as surely as they washed Christ's feet. Sinners, let your eyes become a fountain of tears. Weep for sins that are too many to count. This water of contrition is both healing and purifying.

Second, the bath of Christ's blood — "a fountain... opened for sin and for impurity" (Zechariah 13:1). A soul steeped in the salt water of repentance and bathed in the blood of Christ is made pure. All the ceremonial washings of the law were simply types and symbols pointing to Christ's blood. This blood sets the soul on the path to being made white.

Third, pursue faith — it is the grace that cleanses the soul (Acts 15:9): "Having cleansed their hearts by faith." The woman in the Gospel who merely touched the hem of Christ's garment was healed. A touch of faith heals. If I truly believe that Christ and all His merits belong to me, how can I sin against Him? We do not willingly harm friends we believe love us. Nothing is more powerful to purify the heart than faith. Faith moves mountains — the mountains of pride, lust, and envy. Faith and the love of sin cannot coexist.

Fourth, seek the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). He purges the heart as lightning clears the air. To see the purifying power of the Spirit, consider what He is compared to.

First, to fire (Acts 2:3). Fire purifies — it refines and cleanses metals and separates dross from gold. In the same way, the Spirit of God refines and sanctifies the heart, burning away the dross of sin.

Second, the Spirit is compared to wind (Acts 2:2): "There came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." Wind purifies the air. When the air turns stale and unhealthy from foggy vapors, the wind fans and clears it. In the same way, when the vapors of sin rise in the heart — vapors of pride, covetousness, and earthliness — the Spirit of God rises and breathes on the soul, purging those foul vapors away. The bride in Song of Solomon prays for a gust of the Spirit to make her pure (Song of Solomon 4:16).

Third, the Spirit is compared to water (John 7:38-39): "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke of the Spirit."

The Spirit is like water — not only in making the soul fruitful (for the Spirit causes the desert to bloom like a rose, Isaiah 32:15; 35:1), but also in purifying. Before the Spirit comes, the sinner's heart is unclean and everything he touches carries a taint of impurity (Numbers 19:22). But when the Spirit enters the heart, He washes away its filth with His continual showers and cleansing streams, making it pure and fit for the God of spirits to dwell in.

Fifth, guard against close companionship with the wicked. One empty mind makes another empty. One hard heart makes another hard. A kidney stone is not contagious, but a hardened heart is. One profane spirit poisons another. Beware the company of the wicked.

Question: But what harm is there in this? Did not Jesus Christ spend time with sinners (Luke 5:29)?

Answer 1: That was necessary. If Jesus Christ had not come among sinners, how could anyone have been saved? He went among sinners not to participate in their sins but to heal them of their sins. He was not a companion of sinners — He was a physician to sinners.

Answer 2: Although Christ spent time with sinners, He could not be polluted by their sin. His divine nature was a sufficient shield against infection. Christ could no more be defiled by their sin than the sun is defiled by shining on a manure pile. Sin could no more cling to Christ than a burr could stick to crystal glass. The soil of His heart was so pure that no viper of sin could breed there. Our situation is different. We carry a store of corruption within us, and the smallest exposure increases it. It is therefore dangerous to mix freely with the wicked. If we want to be pure in heart, we must

avoid their company. The person who wants to keep his clothes clean avoids the mud. The wicked are like mire (Isaiah 57:20). Fresh water that runs through salt water becomes brackish.

Sixth, if you want to be pure, keep company with the pure. Just as the communion of saints is in our creed, it should also be in our daily associations (Proverbs 13:20). He who walks with the wise becomes wise — and he who walks with the pure becomes pure. The saints are like a bed of fragrant herbs. By mingling with them, we absorb their sweetness. Association produces resemblance. God sometimes uses godly friendships as a means of converting others.

Seventh, wait at the door of wisdom — honor and receive the preached Word. The Word of God, taken in by faith, transforms the heart into its own likeness (Romans 6:17). The Word is a holy seed. When it is planted in the heart, it causes the heart to share in the divine nature.

Eighth, pray for purity of heart. Job asks the question: "Who can make the clean out of the unclean?" (Job 14:4). God can. Out of an impure heart He can produce grace. Make David's prayer your own (Psalm 51:10): "Create in me a clean heart, O God." Most people pray far more for full pockets than for pure hearts. We should pray for purity of heart with urgency — it is a matter of the highest importance. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. Our prayer must come with sighs and deep longing (Romans 8). There must be not only words but genuine feeling. Jacob wrestled in prayer (Genesis 32:24). Hannah poured out her soul (1 Samuel 1:15). We often pray so coldly — our petitions nearly frozen on our lips — as if we were deliberately teaching God to refuse us. We pray as if we hardly care whether He hears us or not. Christian, be earnest with God for a pure heart. Lay your heart before the Lord

and say: "Lord, You who gave me this heart — give me a pure heart. As it is now, my heart is useless. It defiles everything it touches. Lord, I am not fit to live with this heart, for I cannot honor You. Nor am I fit to die with it, for I cannot see You. Oh, cleanse me. Let Christ's blood be sprinkled upon me. Let the Holy Spirit descend on me. Create in me a clean heart, O God. You who command me to give You my heart — Lord, make my heart pure, and it is Yours."

CHAPTER 17



Matthew 5:8: "They shall see God."

Explaining the blessed privilege of seeing God.

These words are connected to what came before, and they provide a powerful motivation for purity of heart — the pure in heart shall see the pure God. The saints have two kinds of sight of God.

First, in this life — a spiritual sight, through the eye of faith. Faith sees God's glorious attributes in the mirror of His Word. Faith beholds Him as He shows Himself through the lattice of His ordinances. This is how Moses saw Him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27). Believers see God's glory as through a veil — they behold, as it were, His back (Exodus 33:23).

Second, in the life to come — and this is the glorious sight the text refers to: "they shall see God." What a breathtaking prospect! Theologians call this the beatific vision. On that day the veil will be torn away, and God will display Himself in all His glory to the soul — as a king on coronation day appears in all his splendor and majesty. This sight of God will be the heaven of heaven. We will indeed see the angels, and that will be wonderful — but the pinnacle of happiness, the diamond in the ring, will be this: we shall see God. If the sun is absent, it is night no matter how many stars are

shining. The angels are called stars (Job 38:7), but it would be night in heaven if the Sun of Righteousness did not shine there. It is the king's presence that makes the court. This sight of God in glory is partly mental and intellectual — we shall see Him with the eyes of our minds. If there were no intellectual sight of God, how would the spirits of righteous men made perfect see Him? It is also partly physical — though not in the sense that our bodily eyes could behold the radiant essence of God directly. God is spirit (John 4:24), and being spirit, He is invisible (1 Timothy 1:17). He cannot be seen with physical eyes (1 Timothy 6:16). The direct sight of His glory would overwhelm us — this wine is too strong for our weak heads.

But when I say our sight of God in heaven is bodily, I mean this: we shall with our physical eyes behold Jesus Christ, through whom the glory of God — His wisdom, holiness, and mercy — will shine forth to the soul. When you place a backing of polished steel behind glass, a face becomes visible in it. In the same way, the human nature of Christ is like a backing through which we can see the glory of God. This is the sense in which Job's words are to be understood (Job 19:26): "Yet in my flesh I shall see God."

Setting forth the excellence of the beatific vision.

Concerning this blessed sight of God — it is so sublime and sweet that I can only sketch a dim shadow of it. We will understand it far better when we arrive in heaven. For now, let me lay down nine observations about it.

First, our sight of God in heaven will be a clear and open sight. Here we see Him through a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12), but through Christ we will behold God with brilliance. God will unveil

Himself and display His glory to the degree the soul is capable of receiving it. Had Adam never sinned, he likely would never have had as clear a sight of God as the saints in glory will have. 1 John 3:2: "We will see Him just as He is." Now we see Him as He is not — not changeable, not mortal. "Then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12) — that is, clearly and completely. Their love for God and their sight of God will both be perfect.

Second, this sight of God will be a transcendent sight, surpassing all glory. Such brilliant beams will radiate from the Lord Jesus as will infinitely astonish and delight the eyes of all who behold Him. Consider what a blessed sight it will be to see Christ clothed in the robe of our human nature, and to see that nature enthroned in glory above the angels. If God is so beautiful here in His ordinances — Word, prayer, sacraments — if there is such excellence in Him when we see Him by faith through the mirror of a promise, what will it be when we see Him face to face? When Christ was transfigured on the mountain, He was filled with glory (Matthew 17:2). If His transfiguration was so glorious, what will His coronation be? Isaiah 33:17: "Your eyes will see the King in His beauty." All earthly lights are merely eclipses compared with that glorious vision. The greatest painter's brush would only mar it. Even angels' tongues could only diminish it.

Third, this sight of God will be a transforming sight. 1 John 3:2: "We will be like Him." The saints will be changed into glory — just as when light floods into a dark room, the room is utterly transformed from what it was. The saints will see God in such a way that they are changed into His likeness. Here God's people are dimmed and marred by weakness and sin, but in heaven they will

be like the dove clothed with silver wings. They will carry some rays and beams of God's own glory shining within them. As a crystal struck by sunlight sparkles and seems almost like the sun itself, so the saints by beholding the brightness of God's glory will be marked with a trace of that glory. They will not share in God's very essence — just as iron placed in fire becomes like fire yet remains iron, so the saints by beholding the luster of God's majesty will become glorious creatures, but creatures still.

Fourth, this sight of God will be a joyful sight. Acts 2:28: "You will make me full of gladness with Your presence." After a long, bitter winter, how wonderful it will be to see the Sun of Righteousness displaying Himself in full glory! If faith already produces joy — 1 Peter 1:8: "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible" — what will the joy of actually seeing Him be? The sight of Christ will overwhelm the eye with wonder and fill the heart with joy. If seeing a dear friend drives away sorrow, how much more will the sight of God cheer the hearts of the saints in heaven! Then it will truly be said, "Your heart will rejoice" (John 16:22). Two things will make the saints' vision of God in heaven especially joyful.

First, through Jesus Christ the dread and terror of the divine essence will be taken away. Majesty will be present in God to preserve reverence — but it will be a majesty clothed with beauty and tempered with sweetness that awakens joy in the saints. We shall see God as a friend — not as guilty Adam did, fleeing in fear and hiding himself (Genesis 3:10) — but as Queen Esther looked upon King Ahasuerus when he held out the golden scepter to her (Esther 5:2). Surely this sight of God will not be terrifying but comforting.

Second, the saints will not only have vision but enjoyment — they will see God in such a way as to possess Him. True blessedness encompasses both: it lies partly in the mind, as the glory of God is richly displayed before it, and partly in the will, as the soul tastes that glory with deep delight and rests in it. We shall see God in such a way as to love Him, and love Him in such a way as to be filled with Him. The vision of God includes the enjoyment of God. Matthew 25:21: "Enter into the joy of your master" — not merely behold it, but enter into it. Psalm 36:9: "In Your light we see light" — there is vision. Psalm 16:11: "In Your right hand there are pleasures forever" — there is enjoyment. So great will the joy flowing from the sight of God be that the saints will break forth in triumphant praises and hallelujahs.

Fifth, this sight of God will be a satisfying sight. Throw three worlds into the human heart and they will not fill it — but the sight of God satisfies. Psalm 17:15: "As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake." Solomon says the eye is never satisfied with seeing (Ecclesiastes 1:8) — but in heaven the eye will be satisfied with seeing. God, and only God, can satisfy. The saints will have their minds so full of knowledge and their hearts so full of joy that they will lack nothing.

Sixth, this sight of God will be an inexhaustible sight — one that never grows weary. Let a person see the rarest sight on earth, and before long he will be tired of it. He walks into a beautiful garden with pleasant paths, lovely shade, and colorful flowers — but within a short while he grows bored. It is not so in heaven — there is no saturation. We shall never grow weary of seeing God. Since the divine essence is infinite, there will be fresh and new delights

springing from God into the glorified soul with every passing moment. The soul will never desire God so much that it cannot be filled — nor will it be so full that it ceases to desire. God will be so sweet that the more the saints behold Him, the more they will be overwhelmed with longing and delight.

Seventh, it will be a beneficial sight — one that improves and perfects the soul. Some colors delight the eyes while also harming them, but this vision of God will improve the soul and lead to its infinite happiness. Eve's gaze at the tree of knowledge damaged her sight — she became spiritually blind as a result. But the saints can receive no harm from the sight of glory. This sight will be beatific. The soul will never reach its full perfection until it comes to see God — that will be the crowning blessing.

Eighth, this sight of God will be unending. Here on earth we see things for a time, and then our eyes grow dim. But the saints will always behold God. As there will be no cloud over God's face, so the saints will have no speck in their eye. Their sight will never fade. For all eternity they will gaze upon God — that beautiful and glorious object. What a soul-ravishing sight this will be! God will have to enable us to bear it — we are no more naturally able to endure a full sight of glory than a sight of wrath. But after this life, the saints will have their capacities enlarged and be made fit to receive the penetrating beams of glory.

Ninth, this sight of God will come quickly — immediately after death. Some deny that the soul is admitted to the sight of God immediately after death. But I will make the case for it: the saints will pass directly from death into glory. As soon as death closes their

eyes in this world, they will open them to see God. If the soul is not immediately admitted to the beatific vision after death, what happens to it in the interval before the resurrection?

First, does the soul go into torment? That cannot be, because the soul of a believer is a member of Christ's mystical body. If that soul were to go to hell, then something of Christ would go to hell — a member of Christ would be damned for a time. But that is impossible.

Second, does the soul sleep in the body, as some have drowsily imagined? How then do we make sense of this scripture? 2 Corinthians 5:8: "We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." If the soul at death is absent from the body, then it cannot be sleeping in the body.

Third, does the soul die? This was the view of the Lucianists, who held that the soul was mortal and perished with the body. But as Scaliger observes, it is impossible for the soul — being of a spiritual, simple, and uncomposed nature — to be subject to decay. Those who say the soul dies should be asked: in what way does a human soul at death then differ from the soul of an animal? All of this makes it clear that the soul of a believer goes immediately to God after death. Luke 23:43: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." The words "with Me" make it clear that the thief on the cross was taken to heaven — for that is where Christ was (Ephesians 4:10). And the word "today" shows that the thief had an immediate passage from the cross to paradise. So the souls of believers receive a swift vision of God after death — it is but a moment's closing of the eyes, and they shall see God.

The misery of the sinner — that he will not see God.

Use 1: See the misery of the impure sinner — he will not be admitted to the sight of God. Only the pure in heart will see God. Those who live in sin, whose souls are stained black with the filth of hell, will never come where God is. They will have a terrifying encounter with God, but not a beatific vision. They will see the flaming sword and the burning lake — but not the mercy seat. Scripture sometimes calls God a consuming fire, and sometimes the Father of lights. The wicked will feel the fire but never see the light. Impure souls will be covered with shame and darkness as with a cloak, and will never see the face of the King. Those who refused to see God in His ordinances will not see Him in His glory.

We should labor to be rightly prepared for this vision.

Use 2: Since such a blessed privilege awaits us after this life, let me urge all who hear me to pursue two things. First, get into Christ. We cannot come to God except through Christ. We cannot see God except through Christ. When Moses hid in the cleft of the rock, he saw God (Exodus 33:22). In Christ, this blessed Rock, we shall see God. Second, become purified persons. Only the pure in heart will see God — just as only a clear eye can behold a bright, radiant object. Only those whose hearts have been cleansed from sin can have this blessed sight of God. Sin is such a cloud that if it is not removed, it will forever block us from seeing the Sun of Righteousness. Christian, is holiness to the Lord written on your heart? Then you will see God. Many people, as Augustine said, would be happy to go to heaven but are unwilling to take the path that leads there — they want the glorious vision but neglect the gracious union.

There are several kinds of eyes that will never see God: the ignorant eye, the unchaste eye, the scornful eye, the malicious eye, the covetous eye. If you would see God when you die, you must be a purified person while you live. 1 John 3:2-3: "We will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

A word of encouragement for the pure in heart.

Use 3: A word now to the pure in heart. First, stand in awe of this privilege — that you, a creature formed from dust, will be admitted to the blessed sight of God for all eternity. This was Moses's prayer: "I pray You, show me Your glory!" (Exodus 33:18). The saints will behold God's glory. The pure in heart will share the same blessedness that God Himself has — for what is God's blessedness but the contemplation of His own infinite beauty?

Second, begin your sight of God now. Let the eye of faith rest constantly on God. Moses by faith saw Him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27). Often look with the eyes of faith on the One you hope one day to see with glorified eyes. Psalm 25:15: "My eyes are continually toward the Lord." While others look toward the earth as if they expect to find all their comfort there, let us look up to heaven — that is where the best view is. The sight of God by faith lets much joy into the soul. 1 Peter 1:8: "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible."

Third, let this truth be a comfort and refreshment to the pure in heart. Take heart in this: you will shortly see God. The godly see many things here that grieve them — they see a body of death within themselves, they see the sword drawn, they see rebellion

wearing the mask of religion, they see the white devil of respectable hypocrisy. These sights bring sorrow. But a blessed sight is coming: they will see God — and in Him all brilliant beauties and overwhelming joys are to be found.

Fourth, do not lose heart under suffering. All that affliction and death can ultimately do is usher you into the sight of God. As one martyr said to a fellow martyr: "One half-hour in glory will make us forget all our pain." When the sun rises, all the dark shadows of the night disappear. When the warm beams of God's face begin to shine on the soul in heaven, sorrow and suffering will be no more. The thought of this beatific vision should carry a Christian through the waters of affliction with joy like wind in full sail. This is what made Job so willing to embrace death (Job 19:25-26): "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives... Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God."

CHAPTER 18



Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

This is the seventh step of the golden ladder that leads to blessedness. The word peace is sweet, and the work of peace is a blessed work. Blessed are the peacemakers. Notice the connection: Scripture links purity of heart with a peaceable spirit. James 3:17: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable." Hebrews 12:14: "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." And here Christ joins them together: pure in heart and peacemakers. This suggests that there can be no true purity where there is no pursuit of peace — a religion marked by faction and discord is suspect.

These words contain three parts.

First, a duty implied — a peaceable spirit. Second, a duty expressed — to be peacemakers. Third, an honorable title bestowed — they shall be called the children of God.

First, the duty implied: a peaceable spirit. Before people can make peace between others, they must first be at peace themselves. Before they can promote peace, they must love peace.

Doctrine 1: Christians must be peaceable in spirit. This peaceableness of spirit is one of the graces that adorns a believer — it is a jewel of great worth. 1 Peter 3:4: "The hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God." The saints are Christ's sheep (John 10:27), and the sheep is a peaceable creature. They are Christ's doves (Song of Solomon 2:14), and therefore must be without bitterness. It does not suit Christians to be Ishmaels — it suits them to be Solomons. They must be lions in courage, but lambs in peaceableness. God was not in the earthquake or in the fire, but in the still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12). God is found not in the harsh, fiery spirit but in the peaceable spirit. There are four kinds of peace we must seek and cherish.

First, household peace — peace within families. It is called the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). Without it, everything falls apart. Peace is the belt that holds the members of a family together. It is the golden clasp that keeps them from coming apart. We should work to make our homes houses of peace. It is not the beauty of the rooms that makes a home pleasant, but the peaceableness of the people in it. There can be no real comfort in our homes until peace takes up residence there.

Second, there is community peace — a sweet harmony in a congregation or neighborhood, where people's hearts are in tune with one another. This is when everyone is pulling in the same direction, as the apostle says, "perfectly united in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). One out-of-tune string ruins all the music. One troublesome member in a community can endanger the whole. 1 Thessalonians 5:13: "Live in peace with one

another." It is little comfort for our houses to stand side by side if our hearts are far apart. Geographic closeness without genuine unity accomplishes little.

Third, there is civil peace — peace in city and nation. This is the finest jewel in a ruler's crown. Peace is the greatest blessing a nation can enjoy. Bees thrive with noise — but Christians thrive best when, like the building of the temple, no sound of hammer is heard. Peace brings abundance with it. How many would travel great distances to obtain this peace! The ancient Greeks called peace the nurse of Pluto, the god of wealth. All civic life flourishes best in the sunshine of peace. Psalm 147:14: "He makes peace in your borders; He satisfies you with the finest of the wheat." All things flourish in peace. The ancients made the harp the symbol of peace. How sweet would the sound of that harp be after the roar of cannon! Everyone should work to promote this civil peace. The godly person enters into peace when he dies (Isaiah 57:2), but while he lives, peace must enter into him.

Fourth, there is church peace — peace within the body of believers. When there is unity and truth in the church of God, religion has never flourished more than when her children grow like olive plants around her table. Unity in faith and practice is a blessing we cannot value enough. This is what God has promised (Jeremiah 32:39) and what we should pursue (Zechariah 8:19). Ambrose wrote of the Emperor Theodosius that when he lay sick, he was more concerned for the peace of the church than for his own recovery.

Two reasons why we should be peaceable in spirit. First, we are called to peace (1 Corinthians 7:15). God never called anyone to division — that alone is reason enough not to be given to strife. God

has called us to peace. Second, it is the nature of grace to change the heart and make it peaceable. By nature we are fierce and harsh. When God cursed the ground for humanity's sake, the curse was that it would bring forth thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18). The natural human heart lies under this same curse — it produces nothing but the thorns and thistles of strife and contention. But when grace enters the heart, it makes it peaceable. Grace pours in a sweet and loving disposition. It smooths and polishes even the most rough and knotty character. Grace turns the vulture into a dove, the briar into a myrtle tree, and fierce lion-like rage into gentle lamb-like meekness. Isaiah 11:7-8: "The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat." This describes the power the gospel has on people's hearts — it produces such a transformation that those who were formerly full of rage and hostility become peaceable and gentle.

Use 1: This shows us the character of a true saint — he is committed to peace. He keeps the peace. He is a son of peace.

A caution: a person may be peaceable in spirit while still pursuing what is rightfully his. If peace has been sought by every other means and cannot be obtained, a person may go to court and still be a peaceable person. Going to law is like going to war when a nation's rights are threatened. When peace can only be secured by fighting, it is lawful to beat the plowshare into a sword. In the same way, when there is no other way to recover one's rights except through legal action, a person may pursue a lawsuit and still be peaceable at heart. Going to law in this case is not so much fighting against another person as contending for what is one's own. It is not a desire to wrong someone else but a desire to do

right by oneself — a pursuit of justice rather than victory. As the apostle says (1 Timothy 1:8): "The law is good, if one uses it lawfully."

Question: Is all peace worth pursuing? How far is peace lawful?

Answer: Peace with other people must have two limitations.

First, the peace a godly person seeks does not mean forming close friendships with those who live in sin. Though we are to be at peace with sinners as people, we are to wage war against their sins. We treat them with respect as those made in God's image, while opposing their sins as the mark of the devil's image in them. David was committed to peace (Psalm 120:7), but he would not sit and socialize with the ungodly (Psalm 26:4-5). Grace teaches genuine goodwill — we are to be civil toward everyone, even the worst — but not to enter into close friendship with those who live in sin. That would make us partners in their iniquity. Ephesians 5:11: "Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness." Jehoshaphat, though a good man, was rebuked for this (2 Chronicles 19:2): "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?" His fault was not that he maintained civil peace with Ahab, but that he formed a close alliance and assisted Ahab when Ahab was acting against God. We must not pursue peace with others to the point of endangering ourselves. If a person has the plague, we will help him and send him medicine — but we take care not to spend too much time with him or breathe his infected air. In the same way, we may be peaceable toward all — even helpful: praying for them, counseling them, relieving them — but we must beware of too much familiarity, lest we inhale their infection. In short, we must make peace with people in a way that does not break our

peace with our conscience. Hebrews 12:14: "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification." We must not purchase peace at the cost of holiness.

Second, we must not pursue peace with others in a way that compromises truth. Proverbs 23:23: "Buy truth, and do not sell it." Peace must not be purchased by selling truth. Truth is the foundation of faith and the guide for life. Truth is the most precious gem in the church's crown. It is a deposit God has entrusted to us. God entrusts us with our souls, and He entrusts us with His truths. We must not let any of God's truths fall to the ground — even the smallest fragment of this gold is precious. We must not chase the flower of peace and lose the pearl of truth.

Some call for unity — but we must not unite with error. What fellowship does light have with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14)? Many would have peace through the destruction of truth — peace with Arminianism, Socinianism, and those who deny Scripture. That is a peace of the devil's making. Cursed is any peace that makes war with the Prince of Peace. Though we must be peaceable, we are also commanded to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). We must not love the golden crown of peace so much that we strip the jewels of truth from it. Better to lose peace than truth. The martyrs would rather lose their lives than let go of the truth.

A reproof of those who are quarrelsome.

If Christians must be peaceable in spirit, what shall we say about those who are given to strife and contention — who, like flax or gunpowder, ignite at the slightest touch? How far this is from the spirit of the gospel! Scripture marks this as the character of the wicked (Isaiah 57:20): they are like a troubled sea — there is no

rest or quietness in their spirits; they continually hurl out the foam of passion and fury. James 3:14-15: "If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart... this wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic." The lustful person is brutish; the wrathful person is devilish. Everyone is afraid to live in a house haunted by evil spirits — yet how little people fear their own hearts, which are haunted by the evil spirit of wrath and implacability.

And this must be especially taken to heart: the divisions among God's own people. God's own tribes go to war with each other. In Tertullian's time it was said, "See how the Christians love one another!" — but now it might be said, "See how the Christians snarl at one another!" Wicked people agree among themselves, while those who claim to be guided by higher principles are full of bitterness and resentment. Was it not grievous to see Herod and Pilate unite, and at the same time to see Paul and Barnabas fall out (Acts 15:39)? When the disciples called for fire from heaven, Christ said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of" (Luke 9:55). It was as if He were saying: "This fire you are calling for is not holy zeal — it is the wildfire of your own passions. This spirit is out of place for the Master you serve, the Prince of Peace, and for the mission I am sending you on, which is an embassy of peace." It is Satan who kindles the fire of contention in people's hearts and then stands warming himself at the flame. Discord and bitterness among Christians bring their profession of faith seriously into question — for the wisdom that comes from above is peaceable, gentle, and open to reason (James 3:17).

An exhortation to a peaceable spirit.

Use 3: Cultivate a peaceable disposition. Romans 12:18: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." The curtains of the tabernacle were to be joined together (Exodus 26:3-4). In the same way, the hearts of Christians should be looped together in peace and unity. To persuade you toward peaceableness, let me appeal both to reason and conscience.

First, a peaceable spirit fits human nature as God designed it. By nature, people seem suited for peace — better fitted to handle a plow than a sword. Other creatures are naturally equipped with weapons for self-defense: the lion has his claws, the boar his tusks, the bee his sting. Only the human being comes into the world naked and unarmed — as if God intended him to be a peaceable creature. God gave humanity reason so that we would live in harmony and peace.

Second, a peaceable spirit is honorable. Proverbs 20:3: "Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man." We tend to think that giving in to quarreling and letting our passions loose shows strength. But no — it is an honor to step back from strife. Truly noble spirits are such lovers of peace that they need no external constraint to keep the peace. It is the thornbush that tears and scratches everything near it. The cedar and the fig tree — those nobler plants — grow pleasantly and peaceably. Peaceableness is the mark and ornament of a noble mind.

Third, a peaceable spirit is wise. James 3:17: "The wisdom from above is... peaceable." A wise person does not meddle with strife — it is like poking a finger into a hornet's nest. Or as Solomon illustrates (Proverbs 17:14): the beginning of strife is like releasing a flood of water. Strife is like releasing water in two ways.

First, once water begins to flow out, it cannot be stopped. In the same way, once strife begins, there is no end to it.

Second, releasing water is dangerous. If a person breaks through a riverbank and lets in an arm of the sea, the water could flood his fields and drown him. So it is with the person who stirs up strife — he may bring harm on himself and open a floodgate that swallows him whole. True wisdom chooses peace. A prudent person stays away from the thorns as much as possible.

Fourth, a peaceable spirit brings peace with it. A contentious person torments himself and robs himself of comfort. He is like a bird beating itself against the bars of a cage — he is his own enemy (Proverbs 11:17). He is like someone who peels the sweetness from an apple and eats nothing but the bitter core. A quarrelsome person strips all the comfort from his life and feeds only on the bitter core of anxiety — he is his own tormentor. The wicked are compared to a troubled sea (Isaiah 57:20), and the next verse adds: "There is no peace for the wicked." Harsh, contentious spirits cannot enjoy what they possess. But a peaceable spirit brings with it the sweet music of inner peace — it produces calm and harmony in the soul. This is why the psalmist says it is not only good but pleasant to live together in unity (Psalm 133:1).

Fifth, a peaceable disposition resembles God Himself.

First, God the Father is called the God of peace (Hebrews 13:20). Mercy and peace surround His throne. He draws up the terms of peace and sends His ambassadors to proclaim them (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Second, God the Son is called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). His name is Emmanuel — God with us — a name that speaks of peace. His office is to serve as Mediator of peace (1 Timothy 2:5). He entered the world with a song of peace — the angels sang it (Luke 2:14): "Peace on earth." He left the world with a legacy of peace (John 14:27): "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you."

Third, God the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of peace — He is the Comforter. He seals peace into the heart (2 Corinthians 1:22). This blessed dove carries the olive branch of peace in His mouth. A peaceable disposition is therefore evidence of something of God in a person, and so God loves to dwell there. Psalm 76:2: "His tabernacle is in Salem." Salem means peace — God dwells in a peaceable spirit.

Sixth, Christ prayed earnestly for peace. He prayed that His people might be one — of one mind and heart (John 17:11, 21, 23). Notice the basis of Christ's prayer in verse 22: "That they may be one, even as We are one." There was never any discord between God the Father and Christ. Though the Father sent Christ from His side, He never removed Him from His heart. There was always deep love and oneness between them. Christ prayed that as He and His Father were one, His people would also be one in peace and harmony. If Christ prayed so earnestly for peace, should we not do everything we can to answer that prayer? How can we expect Christ to hear our prayers if we refuse to honor His?

Seventh, Christ not only prayed for peace — He bled for it. Colossians 1:20: "Having made peace through the blood of His cross" — peace of every kind. He died not only to make peace between God and humanity, but between person and person. Christ

suffered on the cross to cement Christians together with His own blood. As He prayed for peace, so He paid for peace. Christ bound Himself to bring us into the bond of peace.

Eighth, strife and contention choke the growth of grace. Can good seed grow in ground full of thorns and briars? Matthew 13: the thorns choked the seed. When the heart is full of thorns and is constantly tearing and fighting, can the seed of grace ever take root there? Historians report that the island of Patmos has soil in which nothing will grow. A contentious heart is like Patmos — nothing of grace will flourish there until God transforms the soil and makes it peaceable. How can faith grow in an unpeaceable heart, when faith works through love? It is impossible for a person to produce the sweet fruit of the Spirit while he is steeped in bitterness. If a person has swallowed poison, even the finest food will not nourish him until he takes an antidote to expel the poison. Many come to worship with apparent zeal, but being poisoned by wrath and hostility, they receive no spiritual nourishment. Christ's body builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16). There may be praying and hearing, but there will be no spiritual growth and no building up of the body of Christ without love and peace.

Ninth, peaceableness among Christians is a powerful magnet that draws the world to Christ. Not only gifts, miracles, and preaching persuade people to embrace the truth of the gospel — so does the peace and unity of those who profess it. When, alongside one God and one faith, there is one heart among Christians, it is like scattering seed that draws the doves flocking to the windows. The temple was adorned with beautiful stones (Luke 21:5). Christ's spiritual temple looks beautiful and its stones appear glorious when they are cemented together in peace and unity.

Tenth, a quarrelsome spirit turns Christians into pagans. Implacability is listed as a sin of the pagans (Romans 1:31). They cannot be pacified. Their hearts are like iron — no oil can soften them, no fire can melt them. To be so fierce and violent is a pagan thing — as if, like Romulus, people had been nursed on wolf's milk.

Eleventh, to add even more weight to this appeal: it is the desire of Christ that we live in peace. Mark 9:50: "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Will we not pursue peace for Christ's sake? If we ought to lay down our lives for Christ's sake, will we not at least lay down our quarrels for His sake?

To conclude: if we refuse counsel and commands alike, and continue to nurse a spirit of division and conflict, Jesus Christ will not draw near to us. God's people are called His house (Hebrews 3:6). When Christians' hearts are a spiritual house furnished with peace, they are fit for the Prince of Peace to inhabit. But when that pleasant furnishing is absent and nothing is present but strife and debate, Christ will not own it as His house or honor it with His presence. Who would choose to live in a house that is smoky and burning?

Helps toward peaceableness.

Question: How can we attain a peaceable spirit?

First, guard against the things that hinder it. There are several obstacles to peace — both outward and inward — that we must watch for.

Outward obstacles: whisperers (Romans 1:29). Some people deliberately whisper things in our ears to provoke us. Among these we may include talebearers (Leviticus 19:16). The talebearer car-

ries reports from person to person — the devil sends his letters by this messenger. The talebearer is an incendiary — he fans the coals of strife. He says, "Do you know what so-and-so is saying about you? Are you going to let that wrong stand? Will you allow yourself to be treated that way?" By throwing these firebrands, he stirs up conflict and sets people against each other. We are told to provoke one another to love (Hebrews 10:24) — but nowhere to provoke one another to anger. We should close our ears to those who are known to come on the devil's errand.

Second, guard against inward obstacles to peace.

First, self-love (2 Timothy 3:2): "Men will be lovers of self" — and the next verse adds that they will be "brutal." Enthroning the idol of self has caused countless lawsuits, plunderings, and atrocities in the world. Philippians 2:21: "For they all seek after their own interests." Self-love creates monopolies and enclosures — it is a bird of prey, living off what it can seize. Self-love cuts the bond of peace in two. Put self aside.

Second, pride (Proverbs 28:25): "An arrogant man stirs up strife." Pride and contention are born together. A proud person thinks himself better than others and will fight for the top position. 3 John 9: Diotrephes "who loves to be first among them." A proud person wants everyone to bow to him. Because Mordecai would not bow to Haman, Haman secured a decree for the death of all the Jews (Esther 3:9). What caused all the strife between Pompey and Caesar but pride? Their spirits were too high to yield to each other. When this wind of pride gets into a person's heart, it causes terrible earthquakes of division. Let us shake off this viper of pride. Humility holds Christians together in peace.

Third, envy stirs up strife. The apostle links them together (1 Timothy 6:4): envy and strife. Envy cannot bear to see another person flourish. An envious person, seeing a neighbor with a bigger harvest or more successful business, is quick to pick a fight. Proverbs 27:4: "Who can stand before jealousy?" Envy is a disease that feeds on blood. Beware of it — peace will not coexist with this tenant.

Fourth, credulity (Proverbs 14:15): "The naive man believes everything he is told." A gullible person is close to a fool — he accepts whatever is reported to him, and this often creates conflict. As it is a sin to be a talebearer, it is foolishness to be a tale-believer. A wise person will not accept a report at first hearing but will examine and test it before giving it credit.

Second, work at cultivating those things that maintain and promote peace.

First, faith. Faith and peace live together. Faith believes the Word of God — and the Word says, "Live in peace" (2 Corinthians 13:11). As soon as faith sees the command from the King of heaven, it obeys. Faith persuades the soul that God is at peace with us, and it is impossible to truly believe this while living in conflict with others. Nourish faith. Faith binds us to God in love and to our brothers and sisters in peace.

Second, Christian fellowship. Christians should not grow too distant from one another. The early believers had their love feasts. The apostle, in urging peace, names kindness as a practical means (Ephesians 4:32): "Be kind to one another."

Third, focus on the graces of others rather than their failures. No one is perfect in this life. Scripture speaks of the spots of God's children (Deuteronomy 32:5). Even the most golden Christians fall somewhat short. Let us not quarrel so much with others' weaknesses that we overlook their virtues. If they fail in some ways, they also excel in others. The world tends to pay more attention to the sun during an eclipse than when it shines at full brightness.

Fourth, pray that God will send the Spirit of peace into our hearts. Rather than preying on one another like vultures, we should be praying for one another. Pray that God will quench the fire of contention and kindle the fire of compassion in our hearts toward each other. So much for the first point implied in the text: that Christians should be peaceable in spirit. Now I move to the second point, which is expressed directly: that Christians should be peacemakers.

Pressing Christians to be peacemakers.

Doctrine 2: All genuine Christians should be peacemakers. They should not only be peaceable themselves but also work to bring others to peace. When a joint is dislocated in the body, we set it back in place. When a garment is torn, we sew it together again. In the same way, when others have been torn apart from each other, we should, with a spirit of meekness, work to sew them back together. I will admit it is often a thankless task to go about reconciling differences. Handle a thorny branch as gently as you can, and it will still scratch you (see Acts 7:27). The person who steps between two fighters often ends up taking a blow. But this duty, though it may receive no reward from people, will never go without a blessing from God. Blessed are the peacemakers. How blessed England would be if it had more peacemakers! Abraham

was a peacemaker (Genesis 13:8). Moses was a peacemaker (Exodus 2:13). And the ever-to-be-honored Emperor Constantine, when he called the bishops together at the Council of Nicaea to resolve church controversies, and they came prepared with bitter accusations against each other, took their written charges and tore them up, solemnly urging them to peace and unity.

Use 1: A reproof. This sharply rebukes those who are so far from being peacemakers that they are peace-breakers. If blessed are the peacemakers, then cursed are the peace-breakers. If peacemakers are the children of God, then peace-breakers are the children of the devil. Heretics destroy the truth of the church through error. Schismatics destroy the peace of it through division. The apostle marks such people clearly (Romans 16:17): "Note those who cause dissensions and avoid them." Have no more to do with them than with witches or murderers. The devil was the first peace-breaker — he divided humanity from God and set everything on fire. There are too many troublemakers whose sweetest music is discord — who only unite in order to divide. Such people come together to set the church's peace ablaze. These are the people God's soul hates (Proverbs 6:19): those who sow discord among brothers. They are under a curse (Deuteronomy 27:24): "Cursed is he who strikes his neighbor in secret" — that is, who slanders behind the back and sets friend against friend. If there is a devil in human form, it is the troublemaker.

Use 2: This exhortation calls for two things.

First, let us grieve deeply over the divisions in England. The wild beast has broken through the hedge of our peace. We are like a house falling into ruin — unless the Lord mercifully props and supports us. Would not a loving child grieve to see his mother torn

apart? It is reported that when the civil wars broke out in Rome between Caesar and Pompey, Cato was never seen again to laugh, shave his beard, or cut his hair. Let us consider the damage that divisions cause, so that our hearts may be genuinely grieved by the divisions in church and state.

First, divisions are a sign of great danger for a nation. When the temple veil was torn in two, it was a terrible omen and harbinger of the temple's destruction. The tearing of the veil of the church's peace signals its ruin. Josephus observes that when Jerusalem was besieged by Titus Vespasian, there were three internal factions within the city that did more damage than the enemy itself — and their conflict was what made the city fall. How devastating internal divisions have been to this land! Our internal conflicts and rebellions were the ladders by which the Romans and Normans once climbed into the country. How thoroughly the bond of peace has been broken! We have produced so many splits in the body and broken into so many separate groups that God might justly undo us as a church, as He did the churches of Asia.

Second, the tearing of the church's peace should grieve us because divisions bring reproach and scandal upon religion. They cause people to speak evil of God's ways, as if religion were the source of strife and sedition. Julian, in his attacks on Christians, said they lived together like tigers, tearing and devouring one another. Shall we prove Julian's words true? It is disgraceful to see Christ's doves fighting, to see His lily become a thornbush. The Emperor Alexander Severus, upon seeing two Christians quarreling, told them they should no longer call themselves Christians, "for you dishonor your Master Christ." People should either put down their quarrels or take off the name of Christian.

Third, divisions obstruct the growth of true religion. The gospel rarely flourishes where the fruit of strife is growing. The building of God's spiritual temple is held back by the confusion of voices. Division works like a worm that eats away the fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11). In the church at Corinth, when people began dividing into factions — one for Paul, another for Apollos — very few were truly for Christ. England's divisions have, I am convinced, driven many into atheism.

Second, let us work to heal divisions and be repairers of broken walls. Blessed are the peacemakers. First, Jesus Christ Himself was the great peacemaker — He made a long journey from heaven to earth specifically to make peace. Second, peace and unity is one of the greatest strengthening forces in the church of God. The saints are compared to living stones built together into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). Stones in an arch support and preserve each other. When the early Christians were of one heart (Acts 4:32), what strength that gave them! How they counseled, comforted, and built each other up in the faith! When the members of a body are united, they provide nourishment and support to one another. But when they are broken off, they are useless and the body wastes away. Let us therefore work to be peacemakers. The unity of the church contributes greatly to its stability.

Third, peace makes the church on earth resemble, in some measure, the church in heaven. The cherubim, representing the angels, are depicted facing each other — a picture of their peace and unity. There is no conflict or discord among the heavenly spirits. One angel does not hold a different opinion from another. Though they occupy different orders, they are not of different spirits. They are seraphim and therefore burn — but not with the heat

of contention. They burn with love. The angels serve God not only with pure hearts but with united hearts. Through harmonious peace, we may come to resemble the church triumphant.

Fourth, the one who sows peace will reap peace. Proverbs 12:20: "To counselors of peace there is joy." The peacemaker will have peace with God, peace within his own conscience — and that inner music is the sweetest of all. He will have peace with others. People's hearts will be drawn to him. He will be honored, and called the repairer of the breach (Isaiah 58:12). In the end, the peacemaker will die in peace — carrying a good conscience with him and leaving a good name behind. So I have finished the first part of this text — blessed are the peacemakers — and now I move forward.

CHAPTER 19



Matthew 5:9: "They shall be called sons of God."

These words set forth the glorious privilege of the saints. Those who have made their peace with God and work to make peace between others receive this great honor: they shall be called the children of God.

"They shall be called" — that is, they shall be recognized and regarded as such by God. God never misnaming anything. He does not call children those who are not children. Luke 1:76: "You will be called the prophet of the Most High" — meaning, you will truly be so. They shall be called the children of God — that is, they will be accepted and received as children.

Doctrine: Peacemakers are the children of the Most High. God is said in Scripture to have many children.

First, by eternal generation — in this sense Christ alone is the natural Son of His Father. Psalm 2:7: "You are My Son; today I have begotten You."

Second, by creation — in this sense the angels are called sons of God. Job 1:6 and 38:7: "When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy."

Third, by shared dignity — in this sense kings and rulers are called children of the Most High. Psalm 82:6: "I said, 'You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.'"

Fourth, by outward profession — in this sense God has many children by name. Hypocrites forge a claim to sonship. Genesis 6:2: "The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful."

Fifth, by genuine sanctification — in this sense all true believers are distinctively and fully the children of God.

So that believers may draw full sweetness from this gospel truth, I will explain and demonstrate seven things about it.

First, that by nature we are not the children of God. Second, what it means to be the children of God. Third, how we come to be made children. Fourth, the marks of God's children. Fifth, the love of God in making us children. Sixth, the honor of God's children. Seventh, the privileges of God's children.

Showing that by nature we are not God's children.

First, by nature we are not the children of God. We are not born as God's children — we are made so. By nature we are strangers to God — swine, not sons (2 Peter 2:22). Would a man leave his estate to his pigs? He gives them acorns, not jewels. By nature the devil is our father (John 8:44): "You are of your father the devil." A wicked person would have to search the records of hell to trace his family line.

Showing what it means to be God's children.

Second, what it means to be the children of God. This sonship consists of two things.

First, adoption. Second, the infusion of grace.

First, sonship consists in adoption. Galatians 4:5: "That we might receive the adoption as sons."

Question: What does adoption truly consist of?

Answer: Three things.

First, a transfer from one family to another. The one who is adopted is taken out of the old family of the devil and hell (Ephesians 2:2-3) — to which he was heir apparent — and is brought into the family of heaven, a noble family indeed (Ephesians 2:19). God is his Father, Christ is his Elder Brother, the saints are co-heirs, and the angels are fellow servants in that family.

Second, adoption involves release from the obligations of the old family. Psalm 45:10: "Forget also your father's house." The one who is spiritually adopted no longer belongs to sin. Ephraim will say, "What have I to do any more with idols?" (Hosea 14:8). A child of God does have to deal with sin — but as an enemy to fight, not as a master to obey. He is free from sin's dominion (Romans 6:18). I do not mean free from duty — was it ever heard that a child should be relieved of all duty to his parents? That kind of freedom is the freedom of a rebel.

Third, adoption involves being legally invested with the rights and honors of the family one is adopted into. These are chiefly two.

First, a new name. The one who is divinely adopted receives a new name — formerly a slave, now a son; formerly a sinner, now a saint. This is a name of honor greater than any title of prince or monarch. Revelation 2:17: "To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone,

and a new name written on the stone." The white stone signifies forgiveness; the new name signifies adoption. The new name is written on the white stone to show that our adoption rests on our justification. And the name is written to show that God has all the names of His children recorded in the book of life.

Second, the adopted person receives a share in the inheritance. Being made an heir implies a relationship to an estate. A person adopts another not merely to give him a title but to give him property. So God, in adopting us as His children, gives us a glorious inheritance (Colossians 1:12): "the inheritance of the saints in Light."

First, this inheritance is wonderful — it is an inheritance in light.

Second, it is secure. God keeps the inheritance for His children (1 Peter 1:4) and keeps His children for the inheritance (1 Peter 1:5), so that nothing can prevent them from taking possession.

Third, there is no possibility of disinheritance — the saints are co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). They are members of Christ's body (Colossians 1:18). The members cannot be disinherited unless the Head is.

Fourth, the heirs never die. Eternity is a jewel in their crown. Revelation 22:5: "And they will reign forever and ever."

A question may arise here: How does God's adoption differ from human adoption?

First, a person adopts to fill a gap — because he has no children of his own. But this is not why God adopts. God had a Son of His own — the Lord Jesus. Christ was His natural Son and the Son of His love, as a voice from heaven declared (Matthew 3:17): "This is My beloved Son." He was such a Son that He surpassed all the an-

gels in worth (Hebrews 1:4): "Having become as much better than the angels." So God adopts not out of necessity, but out of compassion.

Second, when a person adopts, he typically adopts only one heir. But God adopts many. Hebrews 2:10: "In bringing many sons to glory." A struggling Christian might ask: why should I ever hope for the privilege of being a child of God? It is true — if God adopted as people do, choosing only one son, you might despair. But He adopts millions. He brings many sons to glory. The reason a person typically adopts only one is that he does not have enough estate for more. But God has plenty for all His children. John 14:2: "In My Father's house are many dwelling places."

Third, when a person adopts someone, it is simple — just sign a legal document and it is done. But when God adopts, it costs Him far more. It required all His wisdom to devise a way to adopt us. It was no small thing to reconcile heaven and hell — to transform children of wrath into children of promise. And when God in His infinite wisdom found a way, it was no easy way. It cost God the death of His natural Son to make us His adopted sons. When God was establishing us as sons and heirs, He could not seal the document except with the blood of His own Son. Creating us cost less than making us sons. To create us cost only a spoken word. To make us sons cost the pouring out of blood.

Fourth, when a person adopts, he settles only earthly privileges on his heir. But God settles heavenly privileges — justification, glorification. People bequeath their land to those they adopt. God does more — He not only gives His children His inheritance but gives them Himself. Hebrews 8:10: "I will be their God." Not only is heaven their portion — God Himself is their portion.

The second element of sonship is the infusion of grace. When God makes anyone His child, He stamps His own image on them. This is beyond what any human can do. A person can adopt another but cannot change his character. If someone has a harsh, difficult disposition, human adoption cannot alter it. But when God makes children, He prepares and sanctifies them for this privilege. He changes their disposition and smooths the roughness of their nature. He makes them not only sons but saints. They are of a different spirit (Numbers 14:24). They become meek and humble — partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Showing how we come to be God's children.

Third, how do we come to be the children of God?

Answer: There are two causes of our sonship.

First, the motivating cause is God's free grace. We were rebels and traitors — what else could have moved God to make sinners into sons except free grace? Ephesians 1:5: "He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will." Free grace cast the deciding vote. Adoption is a mercy spun from the heart of free grace. It would be remarkable for God to take a clod of earth and make it a star — but it is more remarkable still for God to take clay and sin and establish it in the glorious privilege of sonship. How the saints will marvel over the lessons of free grace when they reach heaven!

Second, the instrumental cause of our sonship is faith. Baptism does not make us children — it is indeed a badge and uniform, and it grants access to many outward privileges. But what causes God to receive us as children is faith. Galatians 3:26: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." Before faith is given, we

have no relationship with God — we are, as the apostle says in a related sense, illegitimate and not true sons (Hebrews 12:7). An unbeliever may call God his Judge but not his Father. Wicked people may approach God in worship and hope He will be their Father, but while they remain unbelievers they are illegitimate — and God will not own them. You are the children of God through faith. Faith legitimizes us, confers the title of sonship, and gives us the right to inherit.

How earnestly, then, we should pursue faith! Without faith we are creatures, not children. Without faith we are spiritually illegitimate. That word 'illegitimate' carries two meanings.

First, it is a term of shame. Those who are illegitimate are regarded with disgrace. You who dress in fine clothing but remain in your natural, unregenerate state — you are illegitimate. God looks upon you with disdain. You are vile in His sight — a son of the earth, of the seed of the serpent.

Second, the word 'illegitimate' implies wretchedness and loss. Those who are illegitimate cannot legally inherit — the estate passes only to lawful heirs. Until we are children of God, we have no claim to heaven. And there is no way to become children except through faith. You are the children of God through faith.

Two things need to be discussed here.

First, what faith is. Second, why faith makes us children.

First, what is faith? Since faith grants us sonship, it is vital to understand what faith actually is. There are two kinds of faith.

First, a general faith — believing the truth of everything revealed in the holy Scriptures. This is not the faith that grants sonship. The demons believe all the articles of the creed. Merely

knowing about a medicine, or believing in its effectiveness, will not cure a sick person. This general faith does not save. A person may have it and still not love God. He may believe that God will come to judge the living and the dead and yet hate Him — just as a prisoner believes the judge is coming to court and dreads the thought. Beware of resting in a general faith. You may have it and be no better off than the demons.

Second, there is a saving faith — when we not only believe the report about Christ but rest on Him, embrace Him, take hold of the horns of this altar, and resolve to remain there. In the body there are absorbing veins that draw nourishment into the stomach and process it there. Faith is the absorbing vein that draws Christ into the heart and applies Him there. This is the son-producing faith — through it we are made the children of God. And wherever this faith is found, it is not like medicine in a dead man's mouth. It is powerfully active — it drives obedience and works through love (Galatians 5:6).

Second, why does faith make us children rather than other graces such as repentance or love?

Answer 1: Because God has appointed faith and honored it with this work of making us children. God's design is what gives faith its value and power. It is the king's stamp that makes a coin valid currency. If he stamped his mark on brass or leather, it would pass as freely as silver. The great God has authorized faith and placed His stamp of institution on it — and that is what makes it accepted and gives it a privilege above all other graces to make us children.

Answer 2: Faith makes us children because it is the vital principle. Habakkuk 2:4: "But the righteous will live by his faith." All God's children are living — none are stillborn. We live through faith. Just as the heart is the fountain of life in the body, faith is the fountain of life in the soul.

Answer 3: Faith makes us children because it is the uniting grace — it knits us to Christ. The other graces cannot do this. Through faith we become one with Christ, and so we are brought into relationship with God. Being united to the natural Son, we become adopted sons. The family connection comes through faith. God is the Father of Christ. Faith makes us Christ's brothers — and so God becomes our Father (Hebrews 2:11).

Showing the marks of God's children.

Fourth, the marks of God's children. It is vital to know whose children we are. Augustine said all humanity is divided into two groups: they are either children of God or children of the devil.

First mark: tenderness of heart. 2 Chronicles 34:27: "Because your heart was tender." A childlike heart is a tender heart. The person who once had a hard, flinty heart now has a soft, responsive one. A tender heart is like warm wax toward God — He can press whatever seal He desires into it. This tenderness shows itself in three ways.

First, a tender heart grieves over sin. A child weeps for offending his father. Peter showed a tender heart — when Christ turned and looked at him and he remembered what he had done, he wept like a child. Clement of Alexandria wrote that Peter never heard a rooster crow without weeping. Some scholars tell us that the constant weeping seemed to have carved channels in his face. The

smallest speck makes the eye water. The smallest sin makes the heart ache. David's conscience struck him for merely cutting the corner of King Saul's robe — what would it have done if he had taken his head?

Second, a tender heart melts under God's mercy. Though God's thundering through affliction brings tears from a gracious eye, the heart is never more thoroughly softened than under the warm light of God's mercy. See how David's heart was melted by God's kindness. 2 Samuel 7:18: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?" His heart thawed with gratitude. A child of God says the same: "Lord, who am I — just dust and sin compacted together — that the bright rays of free grace should shine on me! Who am I, that You should take pity on me when I lay in my filth, and spread the golden wings of Your mercy over me?" The soul is overwhelmed by God's goodness. Tears fall. Love blazes. Mercy has a melting effect on the soul.

Third, a tender heart trembles under God's warnings. Psalm 119:120: "My flesh trembles in fear of You." 2 Chronicles 34:27: "Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words against this place, and you tore your clothes." When a father is angry, the child trembles. When ministers declare God's warnings against sin, tender souls sit in trembling. God takes delight in this posture of heart. Isaiah 66:2: "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word." A wicked person, like Leviathan, is made without fear (Job 41:33). He neither believes the promises nor dreads the warnings. Let judgment be declared against sin — he laughs at the shaking spear. He thinks either that God does not see or cannot punish. Mountains quake before the

Lord, hills melt, rocks are thrown down by Him (Nahum 1:5). But the hearts of sinners are harder than rocks. A childlike heart is a tender heart — the stone has been removed.

Second mark: resemblance to God. Colossians 3:10: "You have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him." A child resembles the father. God's children resemble their heavenly Father — they bear His image and likeness. Wicked people claim to be children of God, but the dissimilarity is too great. The Jews boasted they were Abraham's children, but Christ refuted them with this argument (John 8:40): "You are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do." If you were truly Abraham's children, you would not seek to kill an innocent man. You look more like Satan than Abraham (verse 44): "You are of your father the devil." Those who are proud, earthly, and malicious had better say, "Our father who art in hell." It is blasphemy to call God your Father while making the devil your pattern. God's children resemble Him in meekness and holiness — they are His walking portraits. Just as a seal stamps its impression on wax, God stamps the image of His own beauty on His children.

Third mark: they have the Spirit of God. It is called the Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15): "You have received a spirit of adoption as sons."

Question: How can we know that we have received the Spirit of adoption and are therefore in the state of sonship?

Answer: The Spirit of God does three things in those who are made children.

First, a regenerating work. Everyone the Spirit adopts, He also regenerates. God's children are said to be born of the Spirit (John 3:5): "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." We must first be born of the Spirit before we receive this new name of sons and daughters. We are not God's children by creation but by renewal — not by our first birth but by our new birth. This new birth, produced by the Word as its material cause and by the Spirit as its effective cause, is nothing other than a transformation of nature (Romans 12:2). Though it is not a complete transformation in this life, it is a genuine one (1 Thessalonians 5:23). This change of heart is as necessary as salvation itself.

Question: How can we know that we have experienced this regenerating work of the Spirit?

By the pangs of the new birth. By the fruits it produces.

First, by the pangs of the new birth. There are spiritual pangs before the new birth — some brokenness of soul, some groaning and crying out, some inner struggle between flesh and spirit. Acts 2:37: "They were pierced to the heart." A child comes into the world through sharp labor pains. So it is with the new birth. I acknowledge that the new birth varies in intensity — not everyone experiences the same depth of conviction. Yet all experience some form of it. Everyone feels the hammer of the law strike their heart, though some are struck harder than others. The Spirit of God is a Spirit of bondage before it becomes a Spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). What then shall we say to those who are as puzzled by the new birth as Nicodemus was? John 3:4: "How can a man be born when he is old?" The new birth is a mockery to the godless, though it is a great mystery to the godly. Some people thank God they have

never had any spiritual distress — they have always been comfortable. These people are blessing God for what is actually a curse. It is a sign that they are not God's children. A child of grace is always born with labor.

Second, the new birth is known by the things it produces — three of them.

First, sensitivity. A newborn is sensitive to the slightest touch. If the Spirit has regenerated you, you are aware of the first stirrings and risings of sin — things you previously did not even notice. Paul cries out about the law of sin working in his members (Romans 7:23). The newly born saint sees sin at the root.

Second, watchfulness. The person born of the Spirit is careful to protect the life of grace in him. He feeds at the breast of the ordinances (1 Peter 2:2). He is alert to anything that might endanger his spiritual life (1 John 5:18). He lives by faith, yet passes his time here in reverent fear (1 Peter 1:17). This is the first work of the Spirit in those made children: a regenerating work.

Second, the Spirit of God does a work of prayer in the heart. The Spirit of adoption is a Spirit of prayer. Romans 8:15: "You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" While a child is still in the womb it cannot cry. While people lie in the womb of their natural condition, they cannot pray with genuine effect. But when they are born of the Spirit, they cry, "Abba, Father." Prayer is nothing other than the soul breathing itself into the arms of its Father. It is a sweet and intimate conversation with God. As soon as the Spirit of God enters the heart, He sets it praying. No sooner was Paul converted than the very next thing we read is: "Behold, he is praying" (Acts 9:11).

It is reported that when Luther prayed, he spoke with such reverence as if he were addressing God and with such boldness as if he were speaking to a dear friend. Eusebius records that the Emperor Constantine shut himself up each day in a private room in his palace and there, on bended knee, offered his prayers and devotions to God. God's Spirit tunes the strings of the affections, and then we make melody in prayer. For anyone to mock, "Oh, you pray by the Spirit" is blasphemy against the Spirit. One of the chief works of God's Spirit in the hearts of His children is to help them pray. Galatians 4:6: "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"

Question: But many of God's children lack the ability to express themselves eloquently in prayer. How then does the Spirit help them in their weakness?

Answer: Though they may not always have the gifts of the Spirit in prayer, they have the groans of the Spirit (Romans 8:26). Gifts are the ornament of prayer but not its life. A corpse can be dressed in jewels. Though the Spirit may withhold fluency of speech, He gives intensity of desire — and such prayers are most effective. The prayers that the Spirit forms in the hearts of God's children have three qualities.

First, the prayers of God's children are believing prayers. Prayer is the key; faith is the hand that turns it. Faith feathers the arrow of prayer and sends it piercing through to the throne of grace. Matthew 21:22: "And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." Jerome said, "I would not presume to pray unless I bring faith with me." To pray without faith is a kind of mockery — as if we thought God either did not hear or would not answer.

To sustain faith in prayer, we must bring Christ with us when we come before God. 1 Samuel 7:9: "Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it for a burnt offering, and Samuel cried to the Lord for Israel and the Lord answered him." This suckling lamb represented Christ. When we come to God in prayer, we must bring the Lamb Christ with us in the arms of faith. Themistocles carried the king's son in his arms and so calmed the king's anger. The children of God present Christ in the arms of their faith.

Second, the prayers of God's children prompted by the Spirit are earnest prayers. Romans 8:15: "You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" "Father" implies faith; "we cry" implies intensity. The incense was to be placed on burning coals (Leviticus 16:12). The incense represented prayer; the burning coals represented burning desire in prayer. Elijah prayed earnestly (James 5:17) — the Greek phrase means "in praying he prayed" — that is, he did it with great force. In prayer the heart must overflow with the heat of longing. Prayer is compared to groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26) — language drawn from a woman in labor. We should be laboring intensely when we come seeking mercy. Such prayer moves even God Himself (Isaiah 45:11).

Third, the prayers of God's children are heart-cleansing prayers — they purge out sin. Many people pray against sin and then go and sin against the very prayer they offered. But God's children do not merely pray against sin — they pray sin down and out.

Third, the Spirit of God does a witnessing work in the heart. God's children have not only the influence of the Spirit but the witness of it. Romans 8:16: "The Spirit Himself testifies with our

spirit that we are children of God." A child of God has a threefold witness: the witness of the Word, the witness of conscience, and the witness of the Spirit. The Word supplies the major premise: whoever is qualified in such a way is a child of God. Conscience supplies the minor: but you are so qualified. The Spirit makes the conclusion: therefore you are a child of God. The Spirit joins its testimony to that of conscience (Romans 8:16). The Spirit teaches conscience to search the records of Scripture and find its evidence for heaven. It helps conscience to find its name written in a promise. He testifies with our spirit.

Question: But how can I distinguish the witness of the Spirit from a delusion?

Answer: The Spirit of God always witnesses in agreement with the Word, just as an echo answers the voice. Enthusiasts speak much of the Spirit but abandon the Word. Any spiritual impression that either bypasses the Word or contradicts it is a counterfeit. The Spirit of God authored the Word (2 Peter 1:21). If the Spirit were to witness something different from what the Word says, the Spirit would be divided against itself — asserting one thing as truth in the Word and something contradictory in a person's conscience.

Fourth mark: zeal for God. God's children are zealous for His day, His truth, and His glory. Those born of God cannot bear to see Him dishonored. Moses was calm in his own cause but passionate in God's. When the people made the golden calf, he shattered the tablets. When Paul saw the people of Athens given to idolatry, his spirit was stirred within him (Acts 17:16) — the Greek means he was bitter in spirit, or seized with a burning fit of zeal. He could not restrain himself but discharged his zeal like fire against their

sin. Just as we will answer for idle words, so we will answer for sinful silence. David said that zeal for God's house had consumed him (Psalm 69:9). Many Christians whose zeal once nearly consumed them have now consumed their zeal — they have grown lukewarm and indifferent. The warm breath of prosperity has cooled their fire. I cannot believe that a person has the heart of a child of God who can remain unmoved when God's glory suffers. Can a loyal child bear to hear his father publicly mocked? We should be silent under God's discipline, but never under God's dishonor. When holy fire is kindled in the heart, it will break out through the lips. Zeal tempered with holiness gives the soul its finest quality.

Ministers above all others should be unable to bear it when God's glory is challenged and eclipsed. A minister without zeal is like salt that has lost its flavor. Zeal causes a person to take injuries done to God as personally done to himself. It is reported of Chrysostom that he rebuked every sin against God as though he himself had personally been wronged. Ministers must not be shaken by fear or won over by flattery. God never made ministers to be like distorted mirrors that make ugly faces look fair. For lack of this fire of zeal, they are in danger of another fire — the burning lake (Revelation 21:8), into which the cowardly will be cast.

Fifth mark: those who are God's children, being born of God, are of a nobler and more heavenly spirit than worldly people. They set their minds on things above (Colossians 3:2). 1 John 5:4: "Whatever is born of God overcomes the world." The children of God live in a higher realm. They are compared to eagles (Isaiah 40:31) for their soaring, heavenly mindedness. Their souls have risen high. Christ is in their heart (Colossians 1:27) and the world is under their feet (Revelation 12:1). People of the world are always

wallowing in thick clay — sons of the earth, not eagles but earth-worms. The saints are of another spirit. They are born of God and walk with God as a child walks with his father. Noah walked with God (Genesis 6:9). God's children show their noble heritage in their heavenly way of life (Philippians 3:20).

Sixth mark: love for those who are also children of God. God's children are bound together by love, just as all the members of the body are joined by various nerves and ligaments. If we are born of God, we love the brotherhood (1 Peter 2:17). He who loves a person loves that person's portrait. The children of God are His walking portraits — and if we are of God, we love those in whom His image is reflected. If we are born of God, we love the saints even with their weaknesses. Children love each other even with each other's imperfections — a wandering eye, a crooked back. We value gold even when it is mixed with ore. The best saints have their blemishes. Scripture speaks of the spots of God's children (Deuteronomy 32:5). A saint in this life is like a beautiful face with a scar. If we are born of God, we love His children even when they are poor — we are glad to see the image of our Father even when it hangs in the humblest frame.

And if we are children of the Most High, we show our love for God's children in two ways.

First, by esteeming their persons above others. He who is born of God honors those who fear the Lord (Psalm 15:4). The saints are the dearly beloved of God's soul (Jeremiah 12:7). They are His jewels (Malachi 3:17). They are of the true royal bloodline — and the person who has been divinely adopted places a higher value on these than on anyone else.

Second, we show our love for God's children by prizing their company above others. Children love to be together. The fellowship of the saints is precious. Christ's doves flock together. Psalm 119:63: "I am a companion of all those who fear You." A child of God is courteous to all — we read that Abraham bowed respectfully to the people of Heth (Genesis 23:7) — but a child of God has a love of civility toward everyone and a love of deep fellowship only with those who are fellow heirs of the same inheritance.

By this, people may test their adoption. It is plain that those who hate the children of God are not themselves children of God. They smear and blacken the silver wings of Christ's doves with slanderous attacks. They cannot stand to be around the saints. As vultures cannot bear sweet fragrances and are harmed by them, so the wicked do not want to come near the godly — they cannot tolerate the precious fragrance of their graces. Those who hate the offspring of the woman show by that hatred that they belong to the serpent's brood.

Seventh mark: a child of God delights to be often in God's presence. Children love to be near their father. Where the King is, there is the court. Where the presence of God is, there is heaven. God is present in a special way in His ordinances — they are the ark of His presence. If we are His children, we love to spend much time in holy duties. Through the ordinances we draw near to God — we come into our Father's presence. In prayer we have a private conversation with God. The praying soul is communing with God. In the Word we hear God speaking from heaven to us — and how every child of God delights to hear his Father's voice! In the Lord's Supper God kisses His children with tokens of love. He gives them a glimpse of His face and a pledge of His love. It is good to draw

near to God (Psalm 73:28). It is sweet to be in His presence. Every true child of God says, "A day in Your courts is better than a thousand" (Psalm 84:10). Those who neglect the ordinances are not God's children — they have no desire to be in His presence; they prefer the tavern to the temple. Cain went out from the presence of the Lord (Genesis 4:16). Not that he could escape God's sight (Psalm 139:7) — the meaning is that Cain departed from the church, where God gave visible signs of His presence to His people.

Eighth mark: willingness to do the will of our heavenly Father. A childlike heart responds to God's call the way an echo answers a voice. It is like a flower that opens and closes with the sun — opening toward God and closing against temptation. The motto of a newly born saint is (1 Samuel 3:9): "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening." When God tells His children to pray in their rooms, put sin to death, and suffer for His name, they are eager to obey. They will lay down their lives at their Father's call. Hypocrites speak warmly to God but refuse to do what He asks. They are not children — they are rebels.

Ninth mark: a child of God works to bring others into God's family. The holy seed of grace spreads (Galatians 4:19). The person who belongs to the royal family is eager to bring others into it. If you have been divinely adopted, you will earnestly work to make your own children children of the Most High. Two reasons why a godly parent will work to bring his child into the heavenly family.

First, out of a sense of duty. A good parent sees the harm he has done his child — he has passed on the plague of sin, and conscience drives him to make some amends. Under the old law, anyone who struck and injured another was required to see him

healed and pay the cost of his recovery. Parents have inflicted a wound on their children's souls. They must therefore do everything in their power — through instruction, prayer, and tears — to see that wound healed.

Second, out of a burning desire for God's honor. The person who has tasted God's love in adoption sees himself as bound to bring God all the glory he can. If he has a child or friend who is a stranger to God, he is eager to see the work of grace begin in their heart. It brings glory to Christ when multitudes are born to Him.

How far from being God's children are those who have no concern for bringing others into God's family! Much to blame are those employers who care more about what their workers produce than about their souls. Much to blame are those parents who are careless of their children — who do not instill godly principles but let them do as they please. They will let their children lie and curse but not ask a blessing. They will let them read storybooks but not Scripture.

Objection 1: Some say that to catechize and teach children is to take God's name in vain.

Answer 1: Is it taking God's name in vain to obey His command? Deuteronomy 6:6-7: "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons." Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it." Ephesians 6:4: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." This threefold cord of Scripture is not easily broken.

Answer 2: The saints of old were constantly planting principles of holy knowledge in their children. Genesis 18:19: "For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord." 1 Chronicles 28:9: "As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart." Surely Abraham and David were not taking God's name in vain. There is great need to instill holy instruction to counter the poisonous weeds of sin that grow so freely. Farmers who plant young trees set stakes around them to keep them from bending over. Children are young plants. The godly teaching of their parents is like stakes set around them to keep them from bending toward error and ungodliness. When is there a better time to plant knowledge in children than in childhood? Now is the time to give them the breast and let them drink in the pure milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2).

Objection 2: But there is no point in teaching children about God — they have no sense of spiritual things, and our instruction does them no good.

Answer 1: Scripture records children whose early years were sanctified through instruction. Timothy's mother and grandmother taught him the Scriptures from infancy (2 Timothy 3:15): "From childhood you have known the sacred writings." Timothy absorbed religion along with his mother's milk. Scripture records young children who cried "Hosanna" to Christ and rang out His praises (Matthew 21:15). And surely the children of Tyre had received some seeds of grace, since they showed their love for Paul by accompanying him to the seashore. Acts 21:5: "They all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city." Paul had a company of young saints to walk him to his ship.

Answer 2: Suppose our teaching does not immediately reach our children — it may take effect later. Seed sown in the ground does not spring up at once but brings forth a harvest in its season. A person who plants a wood does not see the full growth for many years. If we should refuse to instruct our children because they do not yet benefit, then by the same logic we should not baptize them because they do not yet understand baptism. By the same reasoning, ministers should stop preaching, since many hearers currently receive no benefit.

Answer 3: Even if our counsel and instruction does not reach our children, we have discharged our own duty before God. There is peace in a clear conscience. We must leave outcomes to God. Faithfulness is our responsibility — results are His.

All of this should move parents to sharpen their holy instructions upon their children. Those who belong to God's family and have been adopted as His children will work to make their children more God's children than their own. They will labor in spiritual birth-pangs until Christ is formed in them. A true saint is a magnet that constantly draws others toward God. Let this be enough on the marks of adoption. I move on.

Showing God's love in making us children.

Next, the love of God in making us children. 1 John 3:1: "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God!" God showed power in making us creatures, but love in making us sons. Plato thanked God for making him a man and not a beast. But what cause do those who have

been made children of God have to adore His love! The apostle puts an exclamation on it: "See!" To better see God's love in making us children, consider three things.

First, we were deformed. Ezekiel 16:6-8: "When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!'... the time had come, the time of love." Mordecai adopted Esther because she was beautiful. But we were covered in our own blood when God adopted us. He did not adopt us when we were clothed in the robe of innocence in paradise, adorned with the jewels of holiness, fair and pure. He adopted us when we were in our blood, covered with our spiritual leprosy. The very time of our wretchedness was the time of God's love.

Second, we not only did not deserve to be made children — we did not even desire it. No wealthy man would force someone to become his heir against his will. If a king approached a beggar to adopt him and make him heir to the crown, and the beggar refused the king's offer saying, "I prefer to stay as I am," the king would rightly take that as a deep insult and would not adopt him against his will. This is exactly where we were — we had no desire to be made children of God. We would have remained beggars. But God, out of His infinite mercy and grace, not only offered to make us children but made us willing to accept the offer. See what manner of love this is!

Third — and this is the wonder of wonders — God adopted us as children when we were His enemies. When a man makes someone his heir, he chooses someone close to him. No one would adopt an enemy. But God made us children when we were enemies — made us heirs to the crown when we were traitors to the crown! What astonishing, overwhelming love! See what manner of love

this is! We had no claim on God. We had forfeited our relationship with Him through sin. We had done God every injury and spite we could — defaced His image, broken His law, trampled on His mercies. And when we had made ourselves His enemies, He adopted us. What stupendous love this was! No such love was ever shown to the angels. When the angels fell — though they were of a nobler nature and could likely have served God more than we can — God never granted them the privilege of adoption. He did not make them children but prisoners. They were heirs only to the treasury of wrath.

Let all who are so closely related to God stand amazed at His love. When they were like Saul, breathing out hostility against God — when their hearts were fortified against Him — the Lord conquered their stubbornness with kindness and not only pardoned them but adopted them. It is hard to say which is greater — the mystery or the mercy. This is a love so astonishing that we will be exploring and adoring it for all eternity. No angel in heaven can fathom the depths of it. God's love in making us children is:

First, a rich love. It is love in God to feed us — but it is rich love to adopt us. It is love to give us a crumb, but it is rich love to make us heirs to a crown.

Second, it is a distinguishing love. That when God has passed over millions of others, He has turned a favorable eye upon you! Most are fitted for fuel and made vessels of wrath. That God should say to you, "You are My son" — here is the mirror of mercy, the highest expression of love! Who can stand in the warmth of this burning love and not have his heart set ablaze in return?

Showing the honor of God's children.

Sixth, the honor and renown of God's children. To illustrate this, observe two things.

First, God holds them in precious esteem. Second, He regards them as people of honor.

First, God holds His children in precious esteem. Isaiah 43:4: "Since you are precious in My sight." A father prizes his child above all his possessions. How dearly Jacob prized Benjamin — his own life was bound up in the boy's life (Genesis 44:30). God holds His children in the highest regard. The wicked count for nothing in God's eyes — they are vile persons (Nahum 1:14). Therefore the wicked are compared to chaff (Psalm 1:4) and to dross (Psalm 119:119). A wicked person contributes little while alive and is no great loss when dead — just a bit of chaff blown away, easily spared. But God's children are precious in His sight. They are His jewels (Malachi 3:17). The wicked are clutter that merely takes up space on the earth. But God's children are His jewels, kept in the cabinet of His decree from all eternity. God's children are the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8) — tender and dear to Him — and the covering of His special care shields them. Everything belonging to His children God counts as precious.

First, their name is precious. The wicked leave their name as a curse (Isaiah 65:15). The names of God's children are preserved like treasures (Isaiah 60:15). Their names are so precious that God records them in the book of life, and Christ carries them on His heart. How precious must their names be when God's own name is written on them? Revelation 3:12: "He who overcomes... I will write on him the name of My God."

Second, their prayers are precious. Song of Solomon 2:14: "O my dove... let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet." Every child of God is this dove. Prayer is the voice of the dove, and sweet is this voice. The prayers of God's children are as sweet to Him as music. A wicked person's prayer is like the howling of a dog (Hosea 7:14). The prayers of the saints are like the singing of birds. The finger of God's Spirit touches the strings of their hearts, and they make melody to the Lord. Isaiah 56:7: "Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar."

Third, their tears are precious — they fall as pearls from their eyes. Isaiah 38:5: "I have seen your tears." The tears of God's children fall as precious drops into God's bottle. Psalm 56:8: "Put my tears in Your bottle." A tear from a broken heart is a gift fit for the King of heaven.

Fourth, their blood is precious. Psalm 116:15: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones." This is the blood God will most certainly call to account. Athaliah shed the blood of the king's children (2 Kings 11:1). The saints are children of the Most High, and those who shed their blood will pay dearly for it. Revelation 16:6: "You gave them blood to drink. They deserve it."

Second, God regards His children as people of honor. Isaiah 43:4: "Since you are precious in My sight, you are honored."

First, God considers them honorable. He calls them a crown and a royal diadem (Isaiah 62:3). He calls them His glory (Isaiah 46:13): "Israel, My glory."

Second, God makes them honorable. Just as a king creates dukes, earls, and barons, so God elevates His children into honor — He makes them noble persons, people of distinction. David

thought it no small honor to be the king's son-in-law (1 Samuel 18:18): "Who am I, and what is my life or my father's family in Israel, that I should be the king's son-in-law?" What an infinite honor it is to be children of the Most High God — to be of the royal bloodline of heaven! The saints are of an ancient family — they trace their lineage to the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9). The noblest pedigree is the one that comes from heaven. In this family even the youngest child is an heir — a co-heir with Christ, who is the heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2; Romans 8:17).

Consider the honor of God's children.

First, they bear titles of honor. They are called kings (Revelation 1:6), the excellent of the earth (Psalm 16:3), and vessels of honor (2 Timothy 2:21).

Second, they bear a coat of arms. Scripture has set out their heraldry. Sometimes they bear the lion, for their courage (Proverbs 28:1). Sometimes the eagle, for their loftiness of spirit — always soaring heavenward on the two wings of faith and love (Isaiah 40:31): "They will mount up with wings like eagles." Sometimes the dove, for their meekness and innocence (Song of Solomon 2:14). All of this shows that the children of God are people of distinction.

Second, consider the honor of God's children by comparison. This comparison has two parts.

Compare the children of God, first with Adam, and second with the angels.

First, compare the children of God with Adam in his state of innocence. Adam was a person of great honor — the sole monarch of the world, with all creatures bowing before him as their sovereign.

He was placed in the garden of Eden, a paradise of pleasure, crowned with every earthly blessing. More than this, Adam was God's living portrait — made in the likeness of God Himself. Yet the state of the lowliest of God's children through adoption far surpasses the state of Adam in his robe of innocence. For Adam's condition, though glorious, was changeable — and it was quickly lost. Adam was a bright star, but a falling star. God's adopted children, however, are in a permanent, unalterable state. Adam had the ability to avoid sinning. Believers have the certainty that they will never finally and permanently fall. Once adopted, always adopted. As Isaac said after giving his blessing to Jacob, "Yes, and he shall be blessed" (Genesis 27:33). So we may say of all God's children: they are adopted, and they shall remain adopted. God's children are in a more glorious condition now than Adam was in all his royal honor and dignity.

Second, let us rise as high as heaven and compare God's children with the holy and blessed angels. God's children are equal to the angels, and in some ways above them — which proves they must be people of extraordinary honor.

First, God's children are equal to the angels. This is acknowledged by the angels themselves. Revelation 19:10: "I am a fellow servant of yours." Here a parallel is drawn between John the apostle and the angel. The angel says to John, "I am your fellow servant."

Second, the children of God by adoption are in some ways above the angels — in two respects.

First, the angels are servants to God's children (Hebrews 1:14). Though the angels are glorious spirits, they are nonetheless ministering spirits. The angels serve the saints. Scripture gives us examples of angels attending the persons of God's children — we read of angels waiting on Abraham, Moses, Daniel, the Virgin Mary, and others. The angels do not only serve God's children while they live but also at their death. Lazarus had a company of angels to carry him into God's paradise. So we see that God's children hold a position of dignity above the angels. The angels are their servants in life and in death. This is all the more striking because Scripture never says that the children of God are servants to the angels.

Second, God's children are above the angels because Christ, by taking human nature, has ennobled and honored it above the angelic (Hebrews 2:16): "He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham." Christ never took on the nature of angels. By uniting us to Christ, God has brought us nearer to Himself than the angels are. The children of God are members of Christ's body (Ephesians 5:30). This was never said of the angels. How could they be members of Christ when they are of an entirely different nature from Him? In a general sense Christ may be called the head of the angels as He rules over them (1 Peter 3:22) — but that Christ is the head of the angels in the same intimate, vital union by which He is the head of believers is nowhere found in Scripture. In this respect I can clearly say: the children of God hold a position of honor above even the angels. Though by creation we are made a little lower than the angels, by adoption and mystical union we are above them.

Use: What comfort this should bring a child of God in the midst of slander or poverty! He is a person of honor. He is above the angels. A gentleman who has fallen on hard times will sometimes take pride in his family name and noble blood. In the same way, a Christian who is poor in this world still belongs, by virtue of his adoption, to the family of God. He has the true royal blood flowing in his veins. He carries a nobler coat of arms than the angels themselves.

The great privileges of God's children.

Seventh, the glorious privileges of God's children. What I say now does not belong to the wicked — this is children's bread. Just as the fruit of paradise was guarded by a flaming sword, so these sweet and heart-ravishing privileges are sealed off from the impure, so that worldly and sensual people cannot claim them. There are twelve remarkable privileges belonging to the children of God.

First, if we are God's children, He will be full of tender love and compassion toward us. A father has compassion on his child (Psalm 103:13): "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." What deep tenderness God has toward His children (Jeremiah 31:20)! "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a delightful child?... My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord." Toward the wicked God's wrath is kindled (Psalm 2:12). Toward His children God's compassion is kindled (Hosea 11:8). Mercy and tenderness flow from our heavenly Father as naturally as light flows from the sun.

Objection 1: But God is angry and brings bitter things. How does this fit with love?

Answer: God's love and His anger toward His children are not opposites — they are different things that can coexist. He is angry in love (Revelation 3:19): "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline." We need affliction as much as we need the ordinances. A bitter medicine can be as necessary for health as a soothing tonic. God afflicts with the same love with which He adopts. God is most genuinely angry with His children when He is not disciplining them at all — His hand is heaviest when it seems lightest. Affliction is actually a mark of sonship (Hebrews 12:7): "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons." Someone may say: "Surely God does not love me — I cannot be His child because He follows me with such severe trials." But being under the rod is itself a sign of childhood. God had one Son without sin, but no son without suffering. God sends His children to the school of the cross, and there they learn best. God speaks to us in His Word: children, do not be proud, do not love the world, walk carefully. But we are slow to listen — we actually stop our ears (Jeremiah 22:21): "I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, 'I will not listen.'" Then God says to Himself: "I will lose my child if I do not correct him." So God strikes in love to save. Aristotle describes a bird that lives among thorns yet sings sweetly. God's children make their best music in their hearts when God has hedged their way with thorns (Hosea 2:14). Afflictions refine (Proverbs 17:3): "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold." Fiery trials produce golden Christians. Afflictions purify (Daniel 12:10): "Many will be purged, purified and refined." We think God is going to destroy us — but He is only working to make us white. Some birds only hatch in thunderstorms. Christians are commonly at their best in affliction. God will eventually cause His children to bless

Him for their sufferings. The eyes that sin shuts, affliction opens. When Manasseh was put in chains, then he knew that the Lord was God (2 Chronicles 33:13). Afflictions first prepare us for heaven. The stones in Solomon's temple were cut and polished before being placed in the building. In the same way, the saints — called living stones — must first be hewn and shaped by suffering, as the cornerstone was, before being fit for the heavenly structure. Is there not love in all of God's fatherly discipline?

Objection 2: But sometimes God's children are under the dark clouds of spiritual desertion. Is this not far from love?

Regarding desertion, I must say plainly that this is the most painful condition that can come upon God's children. When the sun is gone, the dew falls. When the sunlight of God's face is withdrawn, tears fall from the eyes of the saints. In desertion, God rains hell out of heaven — to use Calvin's expression. "The arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison of which my spirit drinks" (Job 6:4). This is the poisoned arrow that wounds to the heart. Desertion is a taste of what the condemned experience. God says: "In a moment of anger I hid My face from you" (Isaiah 54:8). I may echo Bernard here: Lord, do You call that a little anger when You hide Your face? Is that all it is? What could be more bitter to me than Your face being eclipsed? God is called in Scripture both a light and a fire. The deserted soul feels the fire but does not see the light. Yet even in this, you who are adopted can trace love. It is said that Hercules's club was made from the wood of the olive tree — and the olive is a symbol of peace. So God's club, with which He strikes the soul in desertion, still carries something of the olive.

There is peace and mercy in it. I will hold out a spiritual rainbow in which the children of God can see their Father's love even through the clouds of desertion.

First, even in times of desertion, God leaves in His children a seed of comfort (1 John 3:9): "His seed abides in him." This seed of God is a seed of comfort. Though God's children in desertion may lack the sealing assurance of the Spirit, they still have the anointing of the Spirit (1 John 2:27). Though they lack the full sun, they have a morning star in their hearts. Like a tree in winter that has lost its leaves and fruit but still has sap in its roots — so in the winter of desertion, there is the sap of grace in the root of the heart. Just as the sun, when it hides behind a cloud and withholds its light from the earth, still sends its warmth and influence — so God's beloved adopted ones, though they may lose the brightness of His countenance, still receive the influence of His grace.

Question: What grace is evident during a time of desertion?

Answer 1: A deep longing for God's love. If God were to say to the deserted soul, "What do you want — ask, even up to half the kingdom?" the reply would be: "Lord, let me see You as I used to see You in Your sanctuary. Let me have one golden ray of Your love." The deserted soul considers everything else worthless in comparison. Gardens, orchards, the most delightful things in the world cannot satisfy — they are like music played to a grieving heart. Like Absalom, the deserted soul longs to see the king's face.

Second, a mourning after God. The darkest day for the child of God is when the Sun of Righteousness is eclipsed. A child of God can bear the world's blows better than God's absence. He melts

into tears. The clouds of desertion produce spiritual rain. And where does this weeping come from? From love.

Third, willingness to endure anything in order to see God. A child of God would be content to carry the cross like Simon of Cyrene, if he could be sure Christ was on it. He would willingly die, if like Simeon he could die with Christ in his arms. Here is the seed of God in a believer — the work of sanctification still present even when the wine of consolation is gone.

Answer 2: God has a purpose of mercy in hiding His face from His adopted children.

First, it is for the testing of grace. Two graces in particular are tested in times of desertion.

First, faith. When we can believe against all sense and feeling — when we have no experiential evidence but still trust a promise — when we do not have the kisses of God's mouth yet still cling to the word of His mouth — this is faith indeed. Here the diamond reveals its true brilliance.

Second, love. When God smiles on us, it is not surprising to love Him. But when He seems to turn away in anger, and we still love Him — burning hotter, like lime the more water is thrown on it — this is love indeed. That love is truly as strong as death which the waters of desertion cannot extinguish (Psalm 27:9; Song of Solomon 8:6).

Second, desertion is for the exercise of grace. We all prefer comfort. If it were up to us, we would always be on Mount Tabor gazing into Canaan. We shrink from trials, agonies, and desertions — as if God could only love us when He had us cradled in His arms. It is hard to rest long in the warmth of spiritual joy without

falling asleep. Too much sunshine causes drought in our graces. Often when God pours comfort into the heart, we begin to let down our guard. It is like musicians who will play you sweet music for as long as they want payment — but the moment you pay them, they are gone and you hear no more. Before joy and assurance, what sweet music of prayer and repentance! But when God sends down the comforts of His Spirit, we either leave off duty altogether or loosen the strings and grow slack. You are taken with the money, but God is taken with the music. Grace is more valuable than comfort. Rachel is more beautiful, but Leah is more fruitful. Comfort is fair to look at, but grace is the fruitful one. And the only way to exercise grace and make it vigorous and alive is sometimes to walk in darkness without light (Isaiah 50:10). Faith is a star that shines brightest in the night of desertion: "Then I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple'" (Jonah 2:4). Grace usually performs its most heroic acts in just such times.

Third answer: God may withdraw from His children in terms of felt experience, but not in terms of union. This was Christ's experience when He cried out, "My God, My God." There was no rupture in His union with the Father — only a suspension of the felt presence. God's love may be darkened and obscured to us by our own sins coming between us and Him, but He is still our Father. The sun may be hidden behind a cloud, but it has not left the sky. The promises, in times of desertion, may seem to be locked away — we do not receive the same comfort from them as before — but the believer's legal claim to them remains fully valid.

Fourth answer: when God hides His face from His child, His heart may still be fully toward him. When Joseph spoke harshly to his brothers and made them think he suspected them of being spies, his heart was still toward them — he was as full of love as ever. He had to step away and weep. In the same way, God is full of love toward His children even when He seems to look on them as a stranger. As Moses's mother placed her child in the ark of reeds and walked away, her eyes never left him. The baby wept — and the mother wept too. So God, when He seems to step away as though He has forsaken His children, is full of sympathy and love toward them. God may change His manner toward us but not break His covenant. There is a difference between God withdrawing and God disinheriting (Hosea 8:11). "How can I give you up, O Ephraim!" — this is the picture of a father who is about to sign a disinheritance deed, but as he sets his hand to it his heart begins to melt with longing for his son. He thinks: even if he is a prodigal, he is still my child. I will not cut off the inheritance. So God says: "How can I give you up?" Though Ephraim has been a rebellious son, he is still a son — I will not disinherit him. God's thoughts may be full of love even when there is a veil over His face. The Lord may change His dealings with His children but not His heart toward them. He may wear the look of an enemy while having the heart of a Father. So the believer can say: I am adopted — and let God do what He will with me, whether He takes up the rod or the staff, it is all one. He loves me.

Second adoptional privilege: if we are children, God will bear with many of our weaknesses. A father bears much from a child he loves (Malachi 3:17): "I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him." We often grieve the Spirit and abuse God's

kindness. Yet God will overlook much in His children (Numbers 23:21): "He has not observed misfortune in Jacob." His love does not make Him blind — He sees sin in His people, but not with an eye of vengeance. He sees it with pity, as a physician sees disease in a patient. He has not seen sin in Jacob so as to destroy him. God may use the rod (2 Samuel 7:14), but not the scorpion. How much God is willing to overlook in His children because they are children! God notices the good in His children and passes over the weakness. God does the opposite of what we tend to do. We often notice the faults in others and overlook their virtues. Our eye goes to the flaw in the diamond rather than its brilliance. But God notices the good in His children. He sees their faith and looks past their failings (1 Peter 3:6). For example, when Sarah obeyed Abraham by calling him lord, the Holy Spirit does not mention her unbelief or her laughter at the promise. Instead He notices the good — her submission to her husband. God covers the fears and failings of His children with His hand. How much did God overlook in Israel, His firstborn! Israel frequently provoked Him with their grumbling (Deuteronomy 1:27), but God answered their grumbling with mercies. He spared them as a father spares his child.

Third privilege: if we are children, God will accept our imperfect service. A parent accepts whatever his child offers in good faith. God accepts the willingness when the deed falls short (2 Corinthians 8:12). We often come to God with broken prayers — but if we are His children, He reads our meaning and receives our prayers as a welcome gift. A father loves to hear his child speak, even when the child only stumbles and stammers. Isaiah 38:14: "Like a swallow or a crane, so I twitter" — even Hezekiah thought

his own prayer sounded like chattering. Yet that prayer was heard (verse 5). A sigh and a groan from a humble heart rises to God like sweet incense (Psalm 38:9): "My groaning is not hidden from You." When all the glittering performances of hypocrites come to nothing, even the smallest sincere offering of a child of God is accepted. A father is glad to receive a letter from his child even if it is full of blots, misspellings, and awkward sentences. Our holy duties are full of such blots and stumbling. Yet coming from broken hearts, they are accepted. Where there is weakness in duty but willingness in the heart, the Lord is moved by it. God says: "This is My child — he would do better if he could" (Ephesians 1:6). "He has accepted us in the Beloved."

Fourth privilege: if we are children, God will provide for us. A father cares for his children — he gives them daily provision and lays up an inheritance for them (2 Corinthians 12:14). So does our heavenly Father.

First, He gives us our daily provision (Genesis 48:15): "The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day." Where does our daily bread come from but from His daily care? God will not let His children starve — though our unbelief sometimes questions His goodness and asks, "Can God prepare a table?" See what arguments Christ uses to prove God's fatherly care for His children (Matthew 6:26): "Look at the birds of the air: they do not sow or reap, yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Does a man feed his pet bird and not his child? Luke 12:27: "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin... if God so clothes the grass..." Does God clothe the lilies and not clothe His lambs (1

Peter 5:7)? "He cares for you." As long as His heart is full of love, His attention will be full of care. This truth is the medicine that kills the worm of unbelief.

Second, as God gives His children provision for the journey, He also lays up an inheritance for them (Luke 12:32): "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Our Father holds the treasury and will give us enough to cover our needs here. And when at death we set sail and arrive on the shore of eternity, our heavenly Father will bestow on us a kingdom — unchangeable and unfading. Here is an inheritance that can never be fully counted or exhausted!

Fifth privilege: if we are children, God will shield us from danger. A father protects his child from harm. God stands as a constant sentinel, keeping evil away from His children.

First, God screens off temporal evil. Life is full of dangers and unpredictable events, but God mercifully guards His children against them (Psalm 7:10). "My defense is of God" (Psalm 121:4). "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." The eye of God's providence is always open. He gives His angels charge over His children (Psalm 91:11), so that a believer has a guard of angels watching over his life. Scripture speaks of the wings of God: just as His mercy feeds His children like a mother nursing them, His power covers them like wings. Consider how miraculously God preserved Israel, His firstborn. Sometimes He covered them with His wings, sometimes He carried them (Exodus 19:4): "I bore you on eagles' wings." This is a picture of God's providential care. The eagle fears no other bird that might harm her young from above — only the arrow from below. So she carries her young ones on her wings, meaning any arrow must first strike her before it can reach

them. In the same way, God carries His children on the wings of His providence. No one can clip those wings, and no arrow can harm those He carries.

Second, God shields His children from spiritual evils (Psalm 91:10): "There shall no evil befall you." God does not promise that no afflictions will come, but that no evil — no truly damning harm — will befall His children.

Question: But sometimes even the godly fall into sin. Doesn't evil in that sense still befall them?

Answer: That evil will not be fatal. Quicksilver is dangerous on its own, but when blended into an ointment it is neutralized and made safe. In the same way, sin is deadly in itself — but when tempered by repentance and mixed with the sacred ointment of Christ's blood, its poison is drawn out and its power to condemn is taken away.

Sixth, if we are children, God will reveal to us the great and wonderful things of His Word (Matthew 11:25): "I thank You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes." A father teaches his children. The child goes to his father and says, "Father, teach me." So David goes to God (Psalm 143:10): "Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God." The Lord glories in this title (Isaiah 48:17): "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit." God's children receive that anointing which teaches them all things necessary for salvation (1 John 2:27). They see mysteries that are veiled from worldly eyes — just as Elisha saw the horses and chariots of fire that his servant could not see (2 Kings 6:17). The adopted children of God see their own sins,

Satan's traps, and Christ's beauty — things that those blinded by the god of this world cannot discern. How did David come to understand more than the ancients (Psalm 119:100)? He had a Father to teach him. God was his instructor (Psalm 71:17): "O God, You have taught me from my youth." Many of God's children feel ignorant and slow. Remember this: your Father will be your teacher. He has promised to give His Spirit to lead you into all truth (John 16:13). And God does not only inform the understanding — He also inclines the will. He does not only teach us what we should do, but enables us to do it (Ezekiel 36:27): "I will cause you to walk in My statutes." What a glorious privilege this is — to have the light of God's Word pointing us to Christ, and the pull of the Spirit drawing us toward Him.

Seventh, if we are children, we have boldness in prayer. A child goes to his father with confidence, and the father cannot bring himself to refuse him (Luke 11:13): "How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" Everything the father has is for his child. If the child needs money, who else would it be for? When you come to God for pardon, for a broken and contrite heart, God cannot deny His child. For whom does He keep His mercies in store, if not for His children?

What gives God's children holy boldness in prayer is this: they consider God not only as a Father in name, but as One who truly has a Father's heart. Some parents are harsh and cold by nature. But God is the Father of mercies (2 Corinthians 1:3). Every drop of compassion in the world flows from Him. In prayer, we should look to God under this understanding — a Father of mercy seated on a throne of grace. We should run to this heavenly Father in every situation.

First, run to Him in your sins. The sick child in 2 Kings 4:19 cried out to his father, "My head, my head!" As soon as he felt ill, he ran to his father for help. Do the same when sin troubles you. Run to God: "My heart, my heart! Father, this dead heart — quicken it. This hard heart — soften it. Father, my heart, my heart!"

Second, run to Him in your temptations. When another child strikes a child, he runs to his father and cries out. So when the devil attacks you with his temptations, run to your Father: "Father, Satan is assaulting me and hurling his fiery darts. He wants to wound my peace and rob You of glory. Father, remove the tempter — it is Your child being harassed by this red dragon. Will You not bruise Satan under my feet?" What a sweet privilege this is — that whenever a burden weighs on our spirits, we can go to our Father and pour out all our cares and sorrows into His arms.

Eighth, if we are children, we are in a state of freedom. Claudius Lysias placed great value on his Roman citizenship. In the same way, sonship is a state of freedom — though this must not be understood in an antinomian sense, as though God's children are free from the moral law. That kind of freedom is what rebels claim. Has anyone ever heard that a child is free from all duty to his parents? The freedom God's children enjoy is a holy freedom. They are freed from the law of sin (Romans 8:2).

This is the sad condition of an unregenerate person — he is in bondage, under the tyranny of sin. Justin Martyr used to say that the greatest slavery in the world is for a man to be ruled by his own passions. A wicked man is as much a slave as someone who rows in a galley. Look into his heart and you will find legions of lusts ruling over him. He must do whatever sin demands. A slave serves at the

command of a usurping tyrant — if the tyrant says dig in the mine, cut stone in the quarry, or pull the oar, the slave must obey. In the same way, every wicked man must do whatever corrupt nature, driven by the devil, commands him. If sin says drink too much, or be unchaste, he obeys sin as a donkey obeys its driver. Sin first enslaves, then destroys.

But God's children, though not freed from the presence of sin within them, are freed from the law of sin. All of sin's commands are like laws that have been repealed — still on the books but no longer in force. Sin may live in a child of God, but it does not reign (Romans 6:14): "Sin shall not have dominion over you." Sin does not have a coercive power over a child of God. There is a principle of grace in his heart that checks corruption. This is a believer's comfort: though sin is not removed, it is subdued. He cannot keep sin out completely, but he keeps it down. Scripture says that the saints crucify the flesh (Galatians 5:24). Crucifixion was a slow, lingering death — first one limb went, then another. In the same way, every child of God is crucifying sin. Some part of the old self is constantly dying off. Though sin does not die perfectly or all at once, it does die daily. This is the blessed freedom of God's children: freed from the law of sin and led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:14). This Spirit makes them willing and glad to obey (2 Corinthians 3:17): "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Ninth, if we are children, we are heirs to all the promises. The promises are called precious (2 Peter 1:4). The promises are like a cabinet filled with jewels — breasts full of the milk of the Gospel, rich in variety, and perfectly suited to a Christian's present need. Does he need pardoning grace? There is a promise that carries for-

givenness with it (Jeremiah 31:34). Does he need sanctifying grace? There is a promise of healing (Hosea 14:4). Does he need strengthening grace? There is a promise of strength (Isaiah 41:10). These promises are the children's bread. The saints are called heirs of the promise (Hebrews 6:17). Christ and heaven are contained in every promise. And every adopted person has a legal claim to every promise in the Bible and can say, "This is mine." The natural man who remains in the old family has no right to these promises. He may read them — as one might read another man's will — but he has no claim to them. The promises are like a garden of flowers, fenced in and enclosed; no stranger may enter to gather them. Only the children of the family may pick them. Ishmael was the son of a slave woman and had no right to the family inheritance. Sarah said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman and her son" (Genesis 21:10). So it will be with the unbeliever — he has not been adopted; he is not of the household. And on the day of judgment, God will say: cast this son of the slave woman into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Tenth, if we are children, we will receive our Father's blessing (Isaiah 61:9): "They are the seed which the Lord has blessed." We read that Isaac blessed his son Jacob (Genesis 27:28): "God give you the dew of heaven" — this was not merely a prayer for Jacob but a prophecy of the happiness and blessing that would come upon him and his descendants. In the same way, every adopted child receives his heavenly Father's blessing. A special blessing is poured into everything he possesses (Exodus 23:25; Psalm 29:11): "The Lord will bless His people with peace." He not only gives peace — He gives it with a blessing. The wicked receive what they have by God's permission, but the adopted receive it with God's

love. The wicked have their blessings by providence; the saints have them by promise. Isaac had only one blessing to give (Genesis 27:38): "Have you but one blessing, my father?" But God has far more than one blessing for His children. He blesses them in soul, body, name, estate, and family line. He blesses them with blessings from above and blessings from below. He multiplies His blessings upon them, and His blessing cannot be reversed. Just as Isaac said of Jacob, "I have blessed him — yes, and he shall be blessed" (Genesis 27:33), so God blesses His children, and they shall indeed be blessed.

Eleventh, if we are children, then everything that happens will work for our good (Romans 8:28): "All things work together for good to those who love God."

First, good things work for good to God's children.

First, mercies work for their good.

First, God's mercies soften His children's hearts. David's heart was overcome by God's mercy (2 Samuel 7:18): "Who am I, and what is my house?" He was thinking: I came from a humble family. I once held a shepherd's staff — and now I hold the royal scepter! "You have spoken of your servant's house for a great while to come. You have promised that my children will sit on the throne — and even that the blessed Messiah will come from my line and race. Is this the way of man, O Lord God?" He was saying: do human beings show such undeserved kindness? Do men act like this? See how this good man's heart melted and was softened by mercy. A flint breaks most easily when it falls on a soft surface.

Second, mercies make God's children more fruitful. Well-cared-for ground produces a better crop. God gives His children health, and they spend themselves freely for Christ. He gives them wealth, and they honor the Lord with it. The backs and bellies of the poor become the fields where they sow the precious seeds of their generosity. A child of God treats his estate as a golden clasp that binds his heart more tightly to God — and as a stepping stone to lift him higher toward heaven.

Second, the ordinances work for good to God's children.

First, the preached Word works good for God's children. It is a fragrance of life, a lamp to their feet, a cleansing basin for their hearts. The preached Word is a chariot of salvation — it grafts and transforms. It brings not only light but eye salve, anointing believers' eyes to see that light. The preaching of the Word is the lattice through which Christ looks out and shows Himself to His saints; this golden pipe of the sanctuary carries the water of life. For the wicked, however, the preached Word works evil. The very word of life becomes a fragrance of death. The same cause can produce very different — even opposite — effects. The sun melts ice but hardens clay. For the unregenerate and the worldly, the Word does not humble — it hardens. Jesus Christ, the greatest of all preachers, was to some a rock of offense. The Jews drew death from His life-giving lips. It is a sad thing when the very breast that feeds should kill. The wicked suck poison from the same breast of the ordinances where God's children suck milk and are nourished toward salvation.

Second, the sacrament works for good to God's children. In the preached Word, the saints hear Christ's voice; in the sacrament, they receive His kiss. The Lord's Supper is a feast of rich things for

the saints — a healing and sealing ordinance. In this cup, a bleeding Savior is brought to revive weary and drooping spirits. The sacrament produces glorious effects in the hearts of God's children. It stirs their affections, strengthens their faith, puts sin to death, revives their hopes, increases their joy, and gives them a foretaste of heaven.

Second, evil things also work for good to God's children (Psalm 112:4): "To the upright, light arises in darkness."

First, poverty works for good to God's children. It starves their lusts and enriches their grace (James 2:5): "Poor in the world, rich in faith." Poverty also drives them to prayer. When God clips His children's wings through poverty, they fly fastest to the throne of grace.

Second, sickness works for their good. It brings the body of sin into a slow decline (2 Corinthians 4:16): "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." This is like the two laurel trees at Rome — when one withered, the other flourished. When the body withers, the soul of a Christian flourishes. How often do we see a lively faith in a failing body? Hezekiah was spiritually better on his sickbed than on his throne. When he was sick, he humbled himself and wept. When he sat on his throne, he grew proud (Isaiah 39:2). God's children recover through sickness. In this sense, "out of weakness they are made strong" (Hebrews 11:34).

Third, reproach works for good to God's children — increasing both their grace and their glory.

First, disgrace increases their grace. A farmer enriches his soil by spreading manure on it, making the ground more fertile. God allows the wicked to heap reproaches and slander on His people, so that their hearts may become richer soil for grace to grow in.

Second, reproach increases their glory. Whoever unjustly takes away a saint's reputation will only add to his crown. The sun shines brighter after an eclipse — the more a child of God is dimmed by reproaches here, the more brilliantly he will shine in the kingdom of heaven.

Fourth, persecution works for good to God's children. The godly are like the plant Gregory Nazianzene describes — it lives by dying and grows by being cut back. The zeal and love of the saints is fanned into flame by suffering, and their joy flourishes. Tertullian says that the early Christians rejoiced more in their persecutions than in their deliverance.

Fifth, even death works for good to God's children. It is like the whirlwind that came to the prophet Elijah — it stripped off his outer garment but carried him up to heaven. So death, for a child of God, is like a fierce wind that tears away the cloak of the flesh (for the body is only the cloak the soul is wrapped in), and carries the soul up to God. This is the glorious privilege of God's children: everything that happens to them works for their good. When they arrive in heaven, as Chrysostom says, they will bless God for every hard and painful providence they endured.

Twelfth and finally, if we are children, we will never finally perish (John 5:24; John 10:28). Those who are adopted are beyond the reach of condemnation (Romans 8:1): "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ." Would a father condemn his own

child? God will never disinherit any of His children. Human fathers sometimes disinherit — Reuben lost the privilege of his birthright because of his sin of incest (Genesis 49:4). Why do parents disinherit their children? Because they cannot make them better — they cannot make them fit for the inheritance. But when we are bad, our heavenly Father knows how to make us better. He can make us fit to inherit (Colossians 1:12): "Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance." Because He has the power to make us better and to work in us the fitness for the inheritance, He will never finally disinherit us.

Because this is such a precious privilege — and the very life of a Christian's comfort rests on it — I will establish it with arguments. The children of God cannot finally perish. The entail of hell and damnation has been cut off. This does not mean that even the best of God's children have no guilt deserving hell — they do. But Christ is the friend at court who has secured their pardon. Therefore the power of sin to condemn has been removed. I will prove this as follows.

First, God's children cannot finally perish because His justice has been fully satisfied for their sins. The blood of Christ is the price paid — not only meritoriously but effectively — for all who believe. Because this is the blood of God Himself, justice is completely satisfied and does not proceed to condemn those for whom this blood was shed and to whom it has been applied. Jesus Christ became a guarantor. He stood as the pledge for every child of God, saying to justice: "Have patience with them, and I will pay you in full." Therefore the believer cannot be held liable for God's wrath. God will not demand the same debt twice — once from the guarantor and again from the debtor (Romans 3:24-26). God is not only

merciful in pardoning His children but also righteous (1 John 1:9). He is just to forgive, because it is an act of His fairness and justice to spare the sinner when He has already been fully satisfied by the guarantor.

Second, a sentence of condemnation cannot fall on God's children, because they are not only His children but also Christ's bride (Song of Solomon 4:11). There is a marriage union between Christ and the saints. Every child of God is a part of Christ — part of His mystical body. Can a member of Christ perish? A child of God cannot perish without Christ perishing with him. And Jesus Christ, who is the husband, is also the Judge — will He condemn His own bride?

Third, every child of God has been transformed into Christ's likeness. He has the same Spirit, the same convictions, the same will — he is a living portrait of Christ. Just as Christ carries the names of the saints on His heart, they carry His image on theirs (Galatians 4:19). Will Christ allow His own image to be destroyed? Theodosius counted as traitors those who defaced his image. Christ will not allow His image in believers to be destroyed. He will not stand by while His own portrait is set on fire. The sea receives all kinds of things — even rotting refuse — but none of God's jewels will ever be cast into the dead sea of hell.

Fourth, if God's children could ultimately perish, then the forgiveness of sin would be no privilege at all. Scripture says, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven" (Psalm 32:1). But what blessing would there be in having sin forgiven, if a final sentence of condemnation could still fall on the heirs of the promise? What good would a king's pardon do a man if he were condemned after the pardon was issued?

Fifth, if God's children could finally be disinherited, then Scripture could not be fulfilled where it speaks of glorious rewards (Psalm 58:11): "Surely there is a reward for the righteous." God sweetens His commands with promises — He ties duty and reward together. Just as in the body the veins carry blood and the arteries carry vital energy, so one part of God's Word carries duty, and another carries reward. If God's adopted children could ultimately be lost, what reward would remain for the righteous? Moses was wise to look to the recompense of reward (Hebrews 11:26). And if the reward could be lost, a door would be flung open to despair.

From all of this it is clear that God's children cannot be disinherited or condemned. If they were to lose their salvation, Christ would lose what He purchased — and His death would have been in vain.

So we have seen the glorious privileges of God's children. What an encouragement this is to pursue the life of faith! How powerfully should this draw people to turn to God? Can the world compete with what a child of God receives? Can the world offer privileges like these? As Saul said (1 Samuel 22:7): "Will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, and make you all commanders?" Can the world do for you what God does for His children? Can it give you forgiveness of sin or eternal life? Are not the leftovers of Ephraim better than the full harvest of Abiezer? Is not godliness gain? What is there in sin that people should love it so much? The work of sin is drudgery, and its wages are death. Those who see more value in sin than in the privileges of adoption — let them go on, and have their ears bored to the devil's service.

CHAPTER 20



Several practical applications drawn from the proposition.

Use 1: Reproof. Here is a charge against those whose lives declare to the world that they are not God's children. All profane persons fall under this — condemnation is written on their forehead.

First, those who mock religion. It would be blasphemy to call these God's children. Would a true child sneer at his father's portrait?

Second, drunkards, who drown their reason and numb their conscience. These openly display their sin like the people of Sodom. They are children indeed — but cursed children (2 Peter 2:14).

Use 2: Exhortation, which has two parts.

First, let us prove to ourselves that we are God's children.

Second, let us live as God's children.

First, let us prove ourselves to be God's children. Many people rely on false and unscriptural evidences.

First false evidence: someone says, "The most respected ministers in the area consider me godly — and can they be wrong? Are those with spiritual sight blind?"

Answer: Others can only observe your outward behavior. If that behavior looks good, they charitably think well of you — but what do God and your own conscience say? Are they on your side? Are you a saint in God's register? It is a poor thing to have the world applauding you while your conscience accuses you.

Second false evidence: someone says, "But I hope I am a child of God — I love my heavenly Father."

Answer: Why do you love God? Perhaps because He gives you grain and wine. That is a mercenary love — love for yourself more than for God. You can lead a sheep anywhere across the field with a bundle of hay in your hand, but throw the hay away and the sheep will follow no further. The hypocrite with his divided heart loves God only for the blessings. When the blessings stop, his affection stops too.

Setting aside these false evidences of adoption, let us look for a solid one. The main evidence of adoption is sanctification. Search your heart, Christian: has the work of sanctification truly taken hold of your soul? Has your understanding been sanctified to recognize what truly matters? Has your will been sanctified to embrace heavenly things? Do you love what God loves and hate what God hates? Are you a consecrated person? This reveals the heart of a true child. God will never reject those who bear His image and mark upon them.

Second, let us live as God's children — conducting ourselves in a way that befits being children of the Most High.

First, in obedience (1 Peter 1:14): "As obedient children." If a stranger tells a child to do something, the child ignores him — but when his father commands, he obeys right away. Obey God out of love. Obey Him readily. Obey every command. If He tells you to give up a sin you hold dear, leave it and loathe it (Jeremiah 35:5): "I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine and cups, and I said to them, 'Drink wine.' But they said, 'We will drink no wine, for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us, saying, \"/>

Second, live as God's children in humility (1 Peter 5:5): "Be clothed with humility" — it is a fitting garment. Let a child of God look into the mirror of God's Word each morning and see his own sinful spots. That will keep him walking humbly the rest of the day. God cannot bear to see His children grow proud. He sometimes allows them to fall into sin — as He did with Peter — so that their pride deflates and they learn to walk on lower ground.

Third, walk as God's children in self-control (1 Thessalonians 5:8): "Let us who are of the day be sober." God's children must not live the way others do — they must be sober and disciplined.

First, in their speech — not rash or coarse (Colossians 4:6): "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt." Grace must be the salt that seasons our words and makes them wholesome. Our words must be solid and thoughtful, not weightless. God's children must speak the language of Canaan. Many claim to be God's children, but their speech betrays them. Their lips do not drop like a honeycomb — they are more like a drain carrying out all the filth of the house.

Second, God's children must be sober in their beliefs. Hold nothing that a clear-minded person could not hold. As Basil says, error is a kind of spiritual intoxication — a form of madness. If Christ were on the earth again, He would have patients in abundance. There are far too many spiritual lunatics among us who need healing.

Third, God's children must be sober in their dress (1 Peter 3:3): "Let your adorning not be external — the braiding of hair and putting on of gold — but let it be the hidden person of the heart." God's children must not be conformed to the world (Romans 12:2). It is not fitting for them to chase every new fashion. What is an immodest dress but a mirror revealing a vain heart? What is painting and adorning the face with artificial marks but learning a kind of dark art? God may one day turn those patches of vanity into marks of a different kind. Walk soberly.

Fourth, live as God's children in diligence. We must be hard-working in our callings. Religion does not give anyone a license for idleness. Jerome's advice to his friend was always to be well employed. "Six days you shall labor." God sets all His children to work — they must not be like the lilies that neither labor nor spin. Heaven, of course, is a place of rest (Revelation 14:13): "They rest

from their labors." There the saints will set down all their tools and take up the harp and the lyre. But while we are here on earth, we must labor faithfully in our calling. God will bless our diligence, not our laziness.

Fifth, live as God's children in courage and nobility of spirit. The saints are high-born — they are of the true royal blood, born of God. They must do nothing in a cowardly or shameful way. They must not cower before the faces of men. Like the bold-spirited Nehemiah: "Should such a man as I flee?" (Nehemiah 6:11). So a child of God should say: should I be afraid to do my duty? Should I weakly give in and bend myself to the sinful desires and whims of others? The children of the Most High should do nothing to stain or dishonor their noble birth. A king's son refuses to do anything beneath his dignity.

Sixth, live as God's children in holiness (1 Peter 1:16). Holiness is the crown of beauty — in this, let us imitate our heavenly Father. A corrupt and immoral child brings shame to his father. Nothing reflects worse on our heavenly Father than the disorderly lives of those who claim to be His children. What will others say — are these the children of the Most High? Is God truly their Father (Romans 2:24)? "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." Let us do nothing unworthy of our heavenly Father.

Seventh, live as God's children in cheerfulness. Jonadab said to Amnon, "Why are you, being the king's son, so downcast?" (2 Samuel 13:4). Why do God's children walk with such heavy hearts? Are they not heirs of heaven? They may face hardship in this world, but they must remember they are of royal blood and belong to the family of God. Consider a man living in a foreign land,

where he is treated poorly. Yet he is glad, because he knows he is a son and heir with a great inheritance waiting in his own country. In the same way, God's children should comfort themselves with this truth: though they are now in a foreign land, they have a title to the Jerusalem above. And though sin still clings to them now — like the lingering traces of a disease — the day is coming when they will be free of it. At death, they will shake off this viper.

Eighth and finally, live as God's children in holy longing and expectation. Children always long to be home (2 Corinthians 5:2): "We groan earnestly." There is more than enough in our Father's house — how we should long to go home! Death carries a child of God to his Father's house. Paul therefore longed to depart. It is a blessed death when, by faith, we can place our souls into our Father's hands (Luke 23:46): "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit."

CHAPTER 21



Matthew 5:10. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We have now come to the last Beatitude: "Blessed are those who are persecuted." Christ wants us to count the cost (Luke 14:27-28): "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, to see whether he has enough to finish it?" Following Christ will cost us the tears of repentance and the blood of persecution. But here is a great encouragement that keeps us from giving up in the day of trouble: blessed now, and crowned in the end.

The text has two main parts.

First, the condition of the godly in this life: they are persecuted.

Second, their reward after this life: theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I will address the first part in detail and bring in the second in the application.

Doctrine: The observation is that true godliness is usually accompanied by persecution (Acts 14:22): "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 13:50). The Jews stirred up the leading men of the city and raised persecution against Paul. Luther defined a Christian as one who is crucified. Though Christ died to remove the curse from us, He did not die to remove the cross. Stones being cut for a building must first pass under the saw and hammer to be shaped and squared. The godly are called living stones (1 Peter 2:5), and they must be hewn and polished by the persecutor's hand to be made fit for the heavenly building. The saints have no exemption from trials. However meek, merciful, or pure in heart they may be, their godliness will not shield them from suffering. They must hang their harp on the willow and take up the cross. The road to heaven is thorny and bloody. It is full of roses in terms of the comforts of the Holy Spirit, but full of thorns when it comes to persecution. Before Israel reached Canaan — the land flowing with milk and honey — they had to pass through a wilderness of serpents and a Red Sea. In the same way, as God's children make their journey to the holy land, they must face fiery serpents and a Red Sea of persecution. As Ambrose said, there is no Abel without a Cain. Paul fought with wild beasts at Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15:32). Take this as a fixed principle: if you will follow Christ, you will see the swords and clubs. Put the cross in your creed. To develop this fully, there are several things we need to consider.

1. What is meant by persecution.
2. The different kinds of persecution.
3. Why there must be persecution.
4. The main persecutions are directed against ministers of Christ.
5. What kind of persecution makes a person blessed.

What is meant by persecution.

First, what is meant by persecution? The Greek word translated "persecute" means to vex and harass — sometimes to prosecute another, to bring him before a court, and to pursue him to the death. A persecutor is a pricking thorn. This is why the church is described as a lily among thorns (Song of Solomon 2:2).

The different kinds of persecution.

Second, what are the different kinds of persecution? There are two kinds.

Persecution by the hand. Persecution by the tongue.

First, persecution by the hand (Acts 7:52): "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" (Romans 8:36): "For Your sake we are being killed all day long" (Galatians 4:29). This is what I call bloody persecution — when God's people are pursued with fire and sword. We read of ten such persecutions under Nero, Domitian, Trajan, and others. There was also the Marian persecution, in which England drank a cup of blood for five years. More recently, Piedmont and the borders of Bohemia were scourged to death by the persecutor's rod. God's church has always been like Abraham's ram — caught in a thicket of thorns.

Second, persecution by the tongue, which takes two forms.

First, reviling. Few people think of this as persecution or take it seriously, but the text calls it exactly that: "When men revile and persecute you" — this is tongue-persecution (Psalm 55:21): "His words were drawn swords." You can kill a man's reputation as surely as his body. A good name is like precious ointment (Ecclesiastes 7:1). A good conscience and a good name together are like a gold ring set with a fine diamond. To wound another's repu-

tation — our Savior calls this persecution. The early Christians suffered precisely this kind of tongue-persecution (Hebrews 11:36): "They had trials of cruel mockings." David became the subject of drunkards' songs (Psalm 69:12). They would sit on their tavern benches and jeer at him. How often the wicked shoot their verbal barbs at God's children: "Look at the holy ones!" They have little idea what they are doing — they are carrying on the work of Cain and Julian. They are persecuting.

Second, slander — as the text says: "When they persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely." Slander is tongue-persecution. Paul was slandered in his teaching — it was reported that he preached that people could do evil so that good might come of it (Romans 3:8). Christ, who cast out demons, was accused of having a demon Himself (John 8:48). The early Christians were falsely accused of killing their children and of incest (Psalm 35:11): "They laid to my charge things that I knew not."

Let us take care not to become persecutors ourselves. Many people think persecution only means fire and sword. But there is also the persecution of the tongue. There are many such persecutors today, who by a kind of devilish skill can turn gold into filth — transforming the precious names of God's saints into objects of shame and disgrace. Many have been punished for clipping coins to reduce their weight. How much more severe a punishment do they deserve who clip the reputations of God's people to make them count for less.

The causes of persecution.

Third, why must there be persecution?

There are two reasons.

First, in regard to God.

1. His decree. 2. His design.

First, God's decree (1 Thessalonians 3:3): "We are appointed to it." Whoever delivers the suffering, God sends it. God allowed Shimei to curse David. Shimei's tongue was the arrow — but God was the One who shot it.

Second, God's design. God has a twofold purpose in the persecutions of His children.

First, testing (Daniel 12:10): "Many shall be tried." Persecution is the test of sincerity — it separates true saints from hypocrites. Unsound hearts put on a good show in times of prosperity, but when persecution comes, they fall away (Matthew 13:20-21). Hypocrites cannot sail in stormy weather. They will follow Christ to the Mount of Olives but not to Mount Calvary. Like green timber, they shrink under the scorching sun of persecution. When trouble comes, they will make Demas's choice rather than Moses's choice — preferring thirty pieces of silver to Christ. God allows persecution in the world to reveal what people truly are. Times of suffering are times of sifting (Job 23:10): "When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." Job had a furnace-tested faith. A true Christian — one born of God — will hold fast to his integrity no matter what he loses (Job 2:3). Christ's true disciples will follow Him even on the water.

Second, purity. God puts His children in the furnace so that they may share in His holiness (Hebrews 12:10). The cross is medicine — it purges out pride, impatience, and love of the world. God washes His people in difficult waters to remove their stains and make them white (Daniel 12:10): "I am dark, but lovely" (Song

of Solomon 1:5). The heat of persecution darkened the bride's skin but made her soul beautiful. Notice how differently afflictions work on the wicked and the godly. Afflictions make the wicked worse and the godly better. Take a piece of rotting cloth — if you scrub and rub it, it falls apart. But if you scrub a piece of silverware, it comes out brighter. When afflictions press on the wicked, they rage against God and tear themselves apart in impatience. But when the godly are scoured by these same trials, they shine all the brighter.

Second, there will be persecutions because of the church's enemies. These vultures prey on God's gentle doves. The church has two kinds of enemies.

First, open enemies. The wicked hate the godly. There is enmity between the seed of the woman and the serpent (Genesis 3:15). In nature there is an inborn opposition between the vine and the bay tree, between the elephant and the dragon. Vultures are repelled by sweet smells. Similarly, the wicked have an inborn hostility toward God's people — they hate the sweet fragrance of their graces. The saints do have their weaknesses, but the wicked do not hate them for that. They hate them for their holiness. And from that hatred comes open violence. A thief hates the light and therefore tries to put it out.

Second, secret enemies, who pretend friendship but secretly stir up persecution against the godly. These are hypocrites and heretics. Paul calls them false brothers (2 Corinthians 11:26). The church laments that her own sons had troubled her (Song of Solomon 1:6) — meaning those raised in her bosom who claimed to share her faith and sympathy were actually the ones who vexed her. The church's worst enemies can come from within her own

house. A cyst appears to be part of the body, but is actually its enemy — it disfigures and endangers it. Those who wave Christ's banner while secretly fighting against Him are the vilest and most contemptible of men.

Showing that the sharpest edge of persecution is turned against ministers.

Fourth, the chief persecutions are directed against ministers. Christ speaks directly to the apostles, whom He was about to commission and send out to preach: "Blessed are you when men persecute you" (verse 11). "So they persecuted the prophets before you" (verse 12). "Take as an example of suffering, my brothers the prophets" (James 5:10). As soon as a man becomes a minister, he becomes in part a martyr. Ministers are Christ's chosen vessels. Just as the finest vessels of gold and silver pass through fire, so God's chosen vessels frequently pass through the fire of persecution. Not every era is like the golden age in which Constantine lived. He honored the ministry greatly — he refused to take his seat at the Council of Nicaea until the assembled bishops came and invited him to do so. He said that if he ever saw a fault in the clergy, he would cover it with his own royal robe. Ministers cannot always expect such favor from rulers. They must be prepared for an alarm. Peter was a gifted preacher who knew how to cast the net on the right side of the boat. At a single sermon he converted three thousand souls — yet neither the power of his teaching nor the holiness of his life could exempt him from persecution (John 21:18): "When you are old, another will dress you and take you where you do not want to go." This referred to his death for Christ. Eusebius records that he was bound in chains and crucified at Jerusalem, upside down. Paul was a holy man, armed with courage and burning with

zeal. Yet as soon as he entered the ministry, imprisonment and persecution awaited him (Acts 9:15-16). His whole life was shaped by suffering (2 Timothy 4:6): "I am already being poured out as a drink offering" — referring to the way sacrificial wine was poured out, pointing to his own coming death, not by fire, but by having his blood shed when he was beheaded. So that this may seem no strange thing for God's ministers, Stephen asks the question (Acts 7:52): "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" Ignatius was torn apart by wild beasts. Cyprian and Polycarp were martyred. Maximinus the emperor, as Eusebius records, gave orders to his officers to put no one to death except the leaders and pastors of the church.

The reasons why persecution has fallen hardest on ministers are these:

First, ministers have their own corruptions like everyone else. To keep them from becoming proud because of the abundance of what has been revealed to them, God allows some messenger of Satan to afflict and trouble them. God sees that they need the flail to thresh the husks away from them. The fire He puts them through is not to destroy them but to refine them.

Second, ministers are Christ's standard-bearers — they carry His colors. They are the captains of the Lord's army, and so they are the most targeted (Philippians 1:17): "I am appointed for the defense of the Gospel." The Greek word used there pictures a soldier stationed at the front of the battle, with bullets flying all around him. A minister's task is to preach against men's sins — sins as precious to them as their own eyes. People cannot bear it. Every person's cherished sin is like a king that rules over him, commanding his love and loyalty. And when Pilate asked, "Shall I

crucify your king?" — in the same way, people will not allow their ruling sin to be crucified. Since the work of the ministry is to come between people and their lusts — to separate two old friends — it is no wonder it faces such fierce opposition. When Paul preached against Diana, the entire city erupted in an uproar. We preach against people's Dianas — the sins that bring them pleasure and profit — and this causes the same kind of uproar.

Third, from the malice of Satan. Ministers come to destroy his kingdom, so the old serpent pours all his venom on them. If we tread on the devil's head, he will bite our heel. The devil has built strongholds in men's hearts — pride, ignorance, unbelief. The weapons of the ministry tear down these strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4). Therefore Satan raises all his forces — the full strength of hell — against the ministry. Satan's kingdom is a kingdom of darkness (Acts 26:18; Revelation 16:10), and God's ministers are called the lights of the world (Matthew 5:14). They come to bring light to those sitting in darkness — and this enrages Satan. He works to put out these lights, to pull down these stars, so that his kingdom of darkness can spread. The devil is called a lion (1 Peter 5:8). The souls of people are the lion's prey. A minister's work is to rescue that prey from the lion's jaws — so how fiercely will the lion roar and try to destroy them!

Use 1: This shows us what a demanding work the ministry is — full of dignity, yet full of danger. The mildest persecution a faithful minister can expect is persecution of the tongue. As Luther said, it is not possible to be a faithful preacher without meeting with trials and opposition.

Use 2: This reveals the corruption of human nature since the fall. People are their own worst enemies — they persecute the very people who come to do them the most good. What is the work of the ministry but to save people's souls — to snatch them like burning sticks out of the fire? Yet people are angry at this. We do not hate the physician who gives us medicine that makes us feel sick, because we know it is for our healing. We do not hate the surgeon who cuts the flesh, because we know it leads to a cure. Why then should people quarrel with ministers? What is our work but to bring people to heaven (2 Corinthians 5:20)? "We are ambassadors for Christ" — we plead for peace to be made between you and God. Yet such is the foolishness of fallen human nature: it repays good with evil. Aristoxenus used to water his flowers with wine, honey, and perfume so they would smell more fragrant and grow more vigorously. We should treat our ministers in the same way — offer them wine and honey, encourage them in their work so they can serve with greater strength. Instead, we give them gall and vinegar to drink — we hate and persecute them. Most people treat their ministers as Israel treated Moses. He prayed for them and worked miracles on their behalf — yet they constantly quarreled with him and sometimes were ready to take his life.

Use 3: If the fury of the world is directed against ministers, then those who fear God should pray earnestly for them (2 Thessalonians 3:2): "Pray for us, that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly, and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men." People should pray that God would give their ministers the wisdom of the serpent — so they do not expose themselves to danger through carelessness — and the boldness of the lion, so they do not betray the truth out of fear.

What kind of persecution makes a person blessed.

Fifth, the next thing to explain is: what kind of suffering makes a person blessed?

First, I will describe the kind of suffering that does not make a person blessed.

First, suffering that we bring on ourselves does not count as martyrdom, and there is little comfort in it. Augustine writes of people in his time called Circumcellions who, driven by an itch for martyrdom rather than genuine zeal, threw themselves into suffering and were accessories to their own deaths — like Saul, who fell on his own sword. We are obligated by all lawful means to preserve our lives. Jesus Christ did not suffer until He was called to it. Treat any impulse that urges you to throw yourself into suffering as a temptation. When people rush headlong into trouble through rashness, it is a cross of their own making — not one God has laid on them.

Second, suffering for one's own offenses does not count as martyrdom (1 Peter 4:15): "Let none of you suffer as a criminal" (Luke 23:41). One of the thieves on the cross himself admitted: "We indeed suffer justly." I do not agree with Cyprian's view that the thief on the cross died as a martyr. No — he suffered as a criminal. Christ took pity on him and saved him, so he died a saint. But he did not die a martyr. When people are punished by the civil authorities for immorality, blasphemy, or other crimes, they are not suffering persecution — they are receiving execution. They die not as martyrs but as wrongdoers. They suffer evil for being evil.

Third, suffering driven by selfish ambition does not make a person blessed — for instance, suffering in order to be hailed as the leader of a faction or to keep a party together. Paul implies that a man could give his body to be burned and still be lost (1 Corinthians 13:3). Ambitious people may sacrifice their lives to win fame. These are the devil's martyrs.

Second, here is what kind of suffering does make a person blessed and earns the crown of martyrdom.

Answer 1: When we suffer in a good cause. The text says it plainly: "Blessed are those who suffer for righteousness' sake." It is the cause that makes a martyr. When we suffer for the truth and stand on the side of the Gospel, that is suffering for righteousness' sake (Acts 28:20): "For the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain."

Second, when we suffer with a good conscience. A person may have a good cause but a bad conscience — he may suffer for righteousness' sake while being unrighteous himself. Paul had not only a just cause but a clear conscience (Acts 23:1): "I have lived my life in all good conscience before God to this day." Paul maintained a good conscience to his dying day. A good conscience allows a person to suffer with genuine peace. It has enabled the saints to walk to the stake as cheerfully as if they were walking to receive a crown. Make sure there is no flaw in your conscience. A ship sailing on the waters must be kept from leaking. When Christians sail on the waters of persecution, they must make sure there is no leak of guilt in their conscience. A person who suffers — even in God's own cause — with an unclean conscience, suffers two hells: the hell of persecution and the hell of condemnation.

Third, when we have a clear call to suffer (Matthew 10:18): "When you are brought before kings..." There is no question that a person may take reasonable steps for his own safety. If God opens a door through His providence, he may flee during a time of persecution (Matthew 10:23). But when he is brought before kings, and the situation is such that either he must suffer or the truth must suffer — that is a clear call to endurance. And that is what is counted as martyrdom.

Fourth, when we have the right purpose in our suffering — that we might glorify God, set our seal on the truth, and show our love for Christ (Matthew 10:18): "When you are brought before kings for My sake." The early Christians burned more in love than in fire. When we look to God in our sufferings and are willing to see His crown honored, even if it means being reduced to ashes ourselves — that is the kind of suffering that wins the garland of glory.

Fifth, when we suffer as Christians (1 Peter 4:16): "If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed." To suffer as a Christian is to suffer with a spirit that becomes a Christian, which means:

First, when we suffer with patience (James 5:10): "Take as an example of suffering and patience, my brothers the prophets." A Christian must not complain bitterly, but should say: shall I refuse to drink the cup of suffering that my Father has given me? A Christian's spirit in suffering should be so marked by meekness that it is hard to say which is greater — his persecution or his patience. When Job lost everything, he held on to the breastplate of innocence and the shield of patience. An impatient martyr is a contradiction in terms.

Second, to suffer as a Christian means to suffer with courage. Courage is the Christian's tested armor — it strengthens and emboldens him. The three young men in the furnace — three champions, really — had a bold and heroic spirit. They did not say to Nebuchadnezzar, "We ought not to serve your gods," but "We will not" (Daniel 3:18). Neither his music nor his furnace could shake their resolve. Tertullian was called a diamond for his unconquerable courage. Holy courage gives us — as one of the early fathers says — faces of brass, so that we are not ashamed of the cross. To suffer as a Christian means to be meek, yet resolute. The more a fire is blown, the higher it flames. It is the same with a brave-spirited Christian — the more opposition he faces, the brighter his zeal and courage burns. What a spirit of boldness was in Luther, who wrote to Melancthon: "If the cause we are committed to is not God's, let us abandon it. But if it is His cause, and He will uphold us — why do we not stand firm?"

Third, to suffer as a Christian means to suffer with cheerfulness. Patience is bearing the cross; cheerfulness is embracing it. Christ suffered for us with a willing heart — His death was a free-will offering (Luke 12:50). He eagerly desired to drink that cup of blood. Our suffering for Christ must have that same quality. Cheerfulness perfumes martyrdom and makes it a sweet-smelling offering to God. This is how Moses suffered — with cheerfulness (Hebrews 11:24-25): "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure mistreatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin." Notice two things:

First, when he had grown up — this was no childish impulse. It was not a decision made in his youth, but as a man of mature judgment.

Second, he chose to suffer affliction. Suffering was not so much his burden as his deliberate choice. The cross was not forced on him — he embraced it. That is what it means to suffer as a Christian: to be a volunteer, taking up the cross cheerfully — even joyfully (Acts 5:41): "They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for His name." The original language says they rejoiced that they had been honored — by being dishonored — for the name of Christ. Tertullian says the early Christians found more comfort in their sufferings than in their deliverance. And indeed a Christian has every reason to be joyful in suffering, because it is a great honor when God calls a person to stand as a witness to the truth. The marks of Christ's suffering that Paul bore in his body were prints of glory. The saints have worn their sufferings as ornaments. Ignatius's chains were his jewels. No princes have ever been as celebrated for their victories as the martyrs have been for their sufferings.

Fourth, we suffer as Christians when we suffer and pray (Matthew 5:44): "Pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you."

There are two reasons we should pray for our persecutors.

First, because our prayers may be the means of converting them. Stephen prayed for his persecutors (Acts 7:60): "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." That prayer proved effective in

bringing some of them to faith. Augustine says the church of God owed Stephen's prayer a debt of gratitude for all the benefit it received from Paul's ministry.

Second, we should pray for our persecutors because they do us good — even against their will. They increase our reward. Every reproach adds to our glory. Every injury makes our crown heavier. As Gregory Nazianzene says in one of his addresses: every stone thrown at Stephen was a precious stone that enriched him and made him shine more brightly in the kingdom of heaven. So I have shown what kind of suffering makes a person blessed and earns the crown of martyrdom.

Inferences drawn from the proposition.

First, this shows us what Christianity truly looks like — holiness joined with suffering. A true saint carries Christ in his heart and the cross on his shoulders (2 Timothy 3:12): "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Christ and His cross are never separated. It is too much to ask for two heavens — one here and one hereafter. Christ's kingdom on earth is the kingdom of the cross. What is the meaning of the shield of faith, the helmet of hope, the breastplate of patience? They imply that we will face suffering. One of the titles given to the church is "afflicted" (Isaiah 54:11). Persecution is the inheritance Christ has left to His people (John 16:33): "In the world you will have tribulation." Christ's bride is a lily among thorns. Christ's sheep must expect to lose their golden fleece — a prospect our flesh does not welcome. That is why Christ calls it a cross (Matthew 16:24) — because it is contrary to flesh and blood. We all want to reign (Acts 1:6): "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" But the apostle tells us that suffering comes before reigning (2 Timothy 2:12): "If

we endure, we will also reign with Him." How reluctant fallen flesh is to bow under Christ's yoke or stretch itself on the cross! But the Christian faith gives no exemption from suffering. To have two heavens is more than Christ Himself had. Was the head crowned with thorns — and do we expect to be crowned with roses (1 Peter 4:12)? "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you." If we are God's gold, it is no surprise to be cast into the fire. There is a painting of Erasmus that shows him half in heaven and half outside — it seems to me a fitting picture of the Christian in this life. In terms of inward consolation, he is half in heaven; in terms of outward persecution, he is half in the fire.

Second, persecution is not a sign of God's anger or a mark of His curse — for blessed are those who are persecuted. If those who die in the Lord are blessed, are not those who die for the Lord blessed also? We are very quick to assume that those who are suffering must be hated and forsaken by God (Matthew 27:40): "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." The Jewish leaders could hardly believe Christ was the Son of God when He hung on the cross — would God allow His own Son to be mocked and abandoned? When the islanders saw the viper on Paul's hand, they concluded he must be a criminal (Acts 28:4): "No doubt this man is a murderer." In the same way, when we see God's people suffering and the viper of persecution clinging to them, we are tempted to say they must be great sinners and that God does not love them. This reveals a failure of understanding. Blessed are those who are persecuted. Persecutions are pledges of God's love and marks of honor (Hebrews 12:7). In the sharpest trial there is the sweetest comfort. When God fans His wheat, it is only to make it purer.

Use 2, first part: This rebukes those who want to be seen as good Christians but refuse to suffer for Christ's sake. Their goal is not to take up the cross but to avoid it (Matthew 13:21): "When persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away." There are many professing Christians who speak well of Christ but will endure nothing for Him. They are like crystal that looks like pearl until it is struck — then it shatters. Many wave palm branches and cry "Hosanna" when Christ comes in triumph, but when the swords and clubs appear, they slip away. King Henry IV of Navarre told Beza, when Beza urged him to commit himself to the Protestant cause, that he would not venture too far out to sea — so that if a storm came, he could retreat to shore. It is to be feared there are some among us who, if persecution came, would make Demas's choice rather than Moses's choice — who would rather keep their skin whole than their conscience clean. Erasmus praised Luther's doctrine highly — but when the emperor threatened all who supported Luther's cause, he shamefully abandoned it. Hypocrites will sooner renounce their baptism than take up the cross. If we want to show ourselves to be genuine Christians, we must, like Peter, throw ourselves onto the water to come to Christ. Anyone who refuses to suffer should read those sobering words (Matthew 10:33): "Whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven."

Second part: This rebukes those who oppose and persecute the saints. How great is their sin? They resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51-52): "You always resist the Holy Spirit. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" Persecutors insult Christ in heaven. They grind His jewels in the dust, touch the apple of His eye, and pierce His side (Acts 9:4-5): "Saul, Saul, why are you per-

secuting Me?" When the foot was struck, the Head cried out. As great as the sin is, so the punishment will be proportionate (Revelation 16:6): "They have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. They deserve it." Will Christ not avenge those who die in His cause? What became of the persecutors? Diocletian ordered that the churches and temples of Christians be razed to the ground, their Bibles burned. He refused to allow any Christian to hold public office. Some Christians he cast alive into boiling lead; others had their hands and lips cut off, leaving only their eyes — so they could witness the full horror of their own suffering. What became of this man? He went mad and poisoned himself. Felix, a commander under Emperor Charles V, was at supper in Augsburg and vowed he would ride up to his spurs in the blood of the Lutherans. That very night a hemorrhage came up his throat and choked him. It would be easy to recount case after case in which God's hand has moved so visibly against persecutors that they could read their sin in their punishment.

That Christians should prepare their minds for suffering in advance.

Use 3, first part: Let this exhort Christians to think ahead and prepare themselves for suffering. Preparing for it in advance can do us no harm and may do us great good.

First, thinking ahead about suffering will make a Christian more serious. The heart tends to be light and shallow. The thought of suffering for Christ would firm it up. Why am I so carefree? Is this a frame of mind fit for persecution? Christians who think

ahead grow serious. They reckon what following Christ will cost them and may cost them — it will cost them the blood of their sins, and it may cost them the blood of their lives.

Second, the thought of coming persecution acts as a seasoning that keeps us from overindulging in present comforts. How quickly could an alarm be sounded? How soon could the clouds drop blood? This thought would loosen the heart's grip on an excessive love of worldly things. Our Savior Himself, at a great feast, spoke of His coming death (Mark 14:3): "She has anointed My body beforehand for burial." In the same way, keeping the thought of change before us is an excellent guard against overindulgence.

Third, thinking ahead about suffering makes it lighter when it actually arrives. The suddenness of a blow adds to its pain. This is what made the news so shattering to the foolish man in the parable, who had not counted the cost: "This night your soul is required of you." This sudden shock will add to the terror of Babylon's downfall (Revelation 18:8): "Her plagues will come in a single day" — not meaning Antichrist will be destroyed in a literal day, but suddenly, without warning, when least expected. Preparing your mind for suffering in advance takes away much of its sharpness when it comes. This is why Christ consistently forewarned His disciples about coming trials — so they would not arrive without warning (John 16:33; Acts 1:7).

Fourth, thinking ahead about persecution reminds us to get our armor ready. It is dangerous — as well as foolish — to be scrambling for what you need when the trial comes, like a soldier looking for his weapons while the enemy is already in the field. Caesar once dismissed a soldier who was sharpening his sword just as the battle was about to begin. The person who has already reck-

oned on persecution will be ready for it. He will have the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit at hand, so he is not caught off guard.

Second, let us prepare for persecution. A wise sailor prepares for the storm while the sea is still calm. God knows how soon persecution may come. There seems to be a dark cloud hanging over the nation.

How we may arm ourselves for suffering.

Question: How shall we prepare for suffering?

Answer: Do three things.

1. Be people rightly prepared for suffering. 2. Avoid the things that will hinder you from standing firm in suffering. 3. Pursue all the things that help you stand firm.

First, work to be rightly prepared for suffering. Be righteous. The person who would suffer for righteousness' sake must himself be righteous — righteous in the gospel sense. Specifically, I call a person righteous if they meet these marks:

First, one who longs for holiness (Psalm 119:5). Though sin clings to his heart, his heart does not cling to sin. Sin may have a foothold but not a welcome (Romans 7:15): "What I am doing, I do not approve." A good person hates most the very sins that Satan most tempts him with and that his own heart most inclines toward (Psalm 119:128).

Second, a righteous person is one who makes God's glory his ultimate aim. The glory of God is worth more than the salvation of all human souls combined. One who is genuinely prepared for suffering is so zealously committed to God's glory that he does not

care what he loses, as long as God gains. He puts God's glory ahead of reputation, property, and family. This was the testimony of Kiliaz, that blessed martyr: "If I had all the gold in the world to spend, I would give it to live with my loved ones — even in prison. Yet Jesus Christ is dearer to me than all of it."

Third, a righteous person is one who prizes a good conscience above everything else. A good conscience is a saint's celebration, his music, his paradise — and he would rather risk anything than violate it. It is said that some fighters, when they have a good weapon, would rather take a blow on their arm than have their weapon damaged. I compare a good conscience to that. A godly person would rather suffer harm to his body or his livelihood than see his conscience wounded. He would rather die than violate the purity of his conscience. A person like this is truly righteous in the gospel sense — and if God calls him to it, he is ready to suffer.

Second, avoid the things that will prevent you from standing firm in suffering.

First, the love of the world. God allows us the use of the world (1 Timothy 6:7), but beware of falling in love with it. The person who is in love with the world will fall out of love with the cross (2 Timothy 4:10): "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" — he abandoned not only Paul's company but his doctrine. Love of the world chokes our zeal. A person married to the world will betray Christ and a good cause for thirty pieces of silver. Let the world rest on you like a loose garment that you can throw off at will. Before a person can die for Christ, he must already be dead to the world. Paul was crucified to the world (Galatians 6:14). It is easy to die when we are already dead in our affections.

Second, carnal fear. There are two kinds of fear.

First, a reverent fear — when a person fears displeasing God, and fears that he might not hold firm. This is a healthy fear. "Blessed is the one who fears always." If Peter had feared his own heart and prayed, "Lord Jesus, I fear I may deny You — strengthen me," Christ would surely have kept him from falling.

Second, there is a cowardly fear — when a person fears danger more than sin, and is actually afraid to be godly. This kind of fear is an enemy to steadfast suffering. God declared that the fearful were not to go to war (Deuteronomy 20:8). The fearful are unfit to fight in Christ's battles. A person gripped by fear does not ask what is best — he asks what is safest. If he can save his estate, he will trap his conscience (Proverbs 29:25): "The fear of man lays a snare." Fear made Peter deny Christ, Abraham equivocate, and David pretend to be insane. Fear pushes people toward compromise, making them think more about getting along than keeping their conscience clean. Fear makes sin look small and suffering look enormous. The fearful person sees double — he views the cross through a lens that magnifies it twice over. Fear reveals a base spirit. It drives people to the most ignoble and unworthy actions. A fearful person will vote against his own conscience. Fear drains courage just as cutting off Samson's hair drained his strength. Fear causes hearts to melt (Joshua 5:1): "Their hearts melted." When a person's strength is gone, he is entirely unfit to carry Christ's cross. Fear is the root of apostasy. Spira's fear led him to renounce and recant his faith. Fear does more damage than the adversary itself. It is not the enemy outside the walls that is most dangerous — it is the traitor within. It is not outward suffering but inner cowardice that destroys a person. The fearful person

has mastered only one posture: retreat. Guard against this — be afraid of fear itself (Luke 12:4): "Do not fear those who can kill the body." Persecutors can only kill the body, which must die soon in any case. The cowardly are listed first among those who will go to hell (Revelation 21:8). Let us fill our hearts with the fear of God. As one wedge drives out another, the fear of God will drive out all lesser, baser fears.

Third, beware of an easily-swayed spirit. A person who can be moved by any word, shaped like wax, led anywhere at will (Romans 16:18): "By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive." A compliant Christian bends to anything — like wool that takes any dye, like a weak reed blown in any direction by whoever breathes on it. One day you might persuade him to commit to a good cause; the next day he has abandoned it. He is not made of oak but willow — he bends with every wind. Beware of a pliable spirit. It is not open-mindedness but foolishness to let yourself be endlessly swayed. A true Christian is like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved (Psalm 125:1). He is like Fabricius, of whom it was said that you might as easily alter the course of the sun as turn him from doing what was right. A good Christian must hold to his convictions. If he is not a fixed star, he will be a falling one.

Fourth, beware of listening to the voice of the flesh. Paul did not consult with flesh and blood (Galatians 1:16). The flesh gives terrible counsel. Saul first listened to the flesh, and then he turned to the devil — he sent to the witch of Endor. The flesh will say: Christ's cross is heavy; there is a nail in that yoke that will tear and draw blood. Be like a deaf snake, stopping your ears to the soothing voice of the flesh.

Third, pursue the things that help you stand firm in suffering.

First, train yourself to endure hardship (2 Timothy 2:3): "Endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." Jacob used a stone for his pillow (Genesis 28:18). "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth" (Lamentations 3:27). Bearing a lighter cross prepares you for a heavier one. Learn to endure reproach with patience, and you will be more prepared to wear an iron chain. Paul died daily — he started with smaller sufferings and, step by step, learned to be a martyr. Just as a wicked person becomes skilled in sin by degrees — starting small, moving to greater, then falling into habit, then growing shameless, then actually boasting in it (Philippians 3:19) — so it is in suffering. A Christian first picks up small pieces of the cross — a disgrace, a brief imprisonment — and then he is able to carry the cross itself.

How far from readiness for suffering are those who indulge the flesh (Amos 6:4): "Those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches" — that is a very poor posture for enduring persecution. A soldier who is stretched out on his bed when he should be in the field training will do poor work in the battle. What shall I say, as Jerome asks, to those Christians whose whole concern is to perfume their clothing, style their hair, and show off their diamonds — yet if suffering comes and the road to heaven has any difficulty in it, they will not set foot on it? Most people are too soft. They have handled themselves too gently and delicately. Those "silken Christians," as Tertullian calls them, who pamper the flesh are not fit for the school of the cross. The tender body that has never known hardship is too soft to carry Christ's cross. Train yourself to endure difficulty. Do not make your pillow too comfortable.

Second, be well-grounded in the knowledge of Christ. A person can never die for someone he does not know (2 Timothy 1:12): "For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed." Blind people are always fearful. A spiritually blind Christian will fear the cross. Enrich yourself with knowledge. Know Christ in His virtues, His offices, and the privileges He gives. See His preciousness (1 Peter 2:7): "To you who believe, He is precious." His name is precious — like ointment poured out. His blood is precious — like healing balm poured out. His love is precious — like wine poured out. Jesus Christ is made up entirely of sweetness and delight. He is wholly worthy of our desire. He is light to the eye, honey to the taste, joy to the heart. Come to know Christ, and you will give up everything for Him. You will embrace Him even in the fire. An ignorant person can never be a martyr — he may set up an altar, but he will never die for an unknown God.

Third, prize every truth of God. Even the smallest fragments of gold are precious — and every ray of truth is glorious (Proverbs 23:23): "Buy truth, and do not sell it." Truth is the object of faith (2 Thessalonians 2:13), the seed of regeneration (James 1:18), and the fountain of joy (1 Corinthians 13:6). Truth leads us to salvation (1 Timothy 2:4). If you are ever to suffer for the truth, you must prize it above everything else. A person who does not value truth more than his own life will never lay down his life for it. The blessed martyrs sealed their testimony to the truth with their blood. There are two things God holds most dear: His glory and His truth. Bishop Jewel said: "I will give up my bishopric. I will give up my reputation. But the truths of Christ I cannot deny."

Fourth, keep a good conscience. If any sin is deliberately harbored in the soul, it will make you unfit for suffering. A person with a painful sore on his shoulder cannot carry a heavy load. Guilt of conscience is like that sore — no one carrying it can bear Christ's cross. If a ship is sound and well-fitted, it will sail on the water. But if it is full of holes and leaking, it will sink. If the conscience is full of guilt — like a leaking hull — it will not hold together in the bloody waters of persecution. A house will not stand in a storm if its supporting pillars are rotten. If a person's heart is rotten, he will not stand in a storm of trial. How can a guilty person endure, when for all he knows he may be going from the fire at the stake straight to the fires of hell? Keep your conscience clean (1 Timothy 3:9): "Holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." A good conscience will endure the fiery trial. It was this that turned the martyrs' flames into beds of roses. A good conscience is a wall of bronze — like Leviathan, it laughs at the shaking of a spear (Job 41:29). Even in prison, a good conscience is a bird that sings in its cage. Augustine calls it the paradise of a good conscience.

Fifth, make Scripture familiar to you (Psalm 119:50). Scripture, when deeply absorbed through meditation, prepares you for suffering. Scripture is a Christian's fortress, his armory, his stronghold. It is like the tower of David, from which a thousand shields hang (Song of Solomon 4:4). From these stores of Scripture, divine strength flows into the soul (Colossians 3:16): "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Jerome writes of someone who, by constant study of Scripture, made his own heart the library of Christ. The blessed Scripture is both a honeycomb for comfort and an ar-

mory for strength. The martyrs' hearts burned within them as they read Scripture, and then their bodies were fit to burn. Scripture arms a Christian against both temptation and persecution.

First, against temptation. When Christ Himself was tempted by the devil, He turned to Scripture for armor: "It is written." Three times He struck the old serpent with that sword. Jerome says Paul could never have made it through so many temptations without his Scripture-armor. Christian, are you being tempted? Go to Scripture. Draw a stone from it to hurl against your Goliath-sized temptation. Are you tempted toward pride? Read 1 Peter 5:5: "God resists the proud." Are you tempted toward lust? Read James 1:15: "When lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death."

Second, against persecution. When the flesh pulls back, Scripture will reinforce us — it puts armor on us and courage into us (Revelation 2:10): "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." The Christian says: I am afraid to suffer. Scripture answers: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." But why should I have to suffer? I love God — isn't that enough? Yes, but God will test your love. "That you may be tested" — God's gold is proved best in the furnace. But the persecution seems so long! No — it is only "ten days." It may feel lasting, but it is not everlasting. What are ten days weighed against eternity? But what do I gain from suffering? What does it lead to? God says: "I will give you the crown of life." Though your body be put to death, your soul will be crowned. But I

am afraid I will give way when the trial comes. "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). The weakest Christian has omnipotence as his support.

Sixth, cultivate a heart that is ready to suffer.

Question: What does that mean?

Answer: It means a self-denying spirit (Matthew 16:24): "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross." Self-denial is the foundation of godliness. If this foundation is not firmly laid, the whole structure falls. If there is any cherished lust in our souls that we will not deny, it will eventually lead either to scandalous sin or to outright apostasy. Self-denial is the thread that must run through the entire fabric of the Christian life. The self-denying Christian will be the suffering Christian. "Let him deny himself, and take up his cross."

To explain this more fully, I will address two things.

First, what is meant by the word "deny."

Second, what is meant by "self."

First, what does "deny" mean? The Greek word means to lay aside, to put off, to treat oneself as nothing. Beza translates it: "Let him renounce himself."

Second, what does "self" mean? It is used in four ways.

First, a person must deny worldly self — that is, his material possessions (Matthew 19:27): "Behold, we have left everything and followed You." The gold of Ophir must be given up for the pearl of great price. As the noble Marquess of Vico declared: "Let their money perish with them who count all the gold and silver in the world worth more than one hour's communion with Christ."

Second, a person must deny relational self — his dearest relationships, when God calls for it. If our closest ties — father, mother — stand in our way and would keep us from doing our duty, we must step over or past them (Luke 14:26): "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children... he cannot be My disciple." Relationships must not outweigh Christ.

Third, a person must deny physical self — his own life. He must be willing to become a sacrifice, to see Christ's crown advanced even if it means his own destruction (Luke 14:26; Revelation 12:11): "They did not love their life even when faced with death." Jesus Christ was dearer to them than their own blood.

Fourth, a person must deny carnal self. This, I believe, is the primary meaning of the text.

First, he must deny ease-seeking. The flesh constantly cries out for comfort. It is reluctant to bow under Christ's yoke or stretch itself on the cross. The flesh protests that there is a lion in the road (Proverbs 22:13). We must deny this craving for ease. Those who sink into the soft pillow of laziness will never take up the cross (2 Timothy 2:3): "Endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." We must force our way through to heaven through effort and cost. Caesar's soldiers fought through hunger and cold.

Second, a person must deny self-importance. By nature, every person has an inflated opinion of himself — he is drunk with spiritual pride. And a proud person is unfit for suffering; he thinks himself too good to endure it. He says to himself: I, who am of such noble birth, such ability, such standing in the world — should

I suffer? A proud person despises the cross. How did Christ come to suffer? He humbled Himself and became obedient to death (Philippians 2:8). Let the feathers of pride fall.

Third, a person must deny self-confidence. Peter's overconfidence was his undoing (Matthew 26:33-34): "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away... even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." How he presumed on his own strength — as if he had more grace than all the other apostles combined! His denial of Christ came precisely from his failure to deny himself. Deny your own strength. Samson's strength was in his hair; a Christian's strength is in Christ. The one who trusts in himself will be left to himself. The one who goes out in his own strength will come back in shame.

Fourth, a person must deny self-reasoning. Scripture speaks of the wisdom of the flesh (2 Corinthians 1:12). Self-reasoning is carnal cunning. The flesh says: it is wise to avoid suffering; it is wise not to speak out against sin; it is wise to find clever distinctions that let you avoid the cross. The wisdom of the flesh is to protect the flesh. There is, of course, a true Christian prudence to be used — the serpent's eye should be in the dove's head. Wisdom and innocence go well together. But it is dangerous to separate them. Cursed is any cleverness that teaches us to avoid duty. That kind of wisdom is not from above — it is earthly and devilish (James 3:15), learned from the old serpent. This cunning will turn to foolishness in the end. It is like a man who, to save his money, throws himself overboard into the sea. The cunning person, to save his skin, will damn his soul.

Fifth, a person must deny his own will. Gregory calls the will the commander-in-chief of all the soul's faculties. In Adam's original state of innocence, the will was aligned with God — like an instrument in tune, it made harmony and moved in step with God's will. But now the will is corrupt, and like a powerful current, it carries us violently toward evil. The will does not merely lack inclination toward good; it actively opposes it (Acts 7:51): "You always resist the Holy Spirit." There is no greater enemy than the will. It stands against God (2 Peter 2:10). The will loves sin and hates the cross. If we are ever to suffer for God, we must go against our own will. The will itself must be put to death. A Christian must say: "Not my will, Lord, but Yours be done."

Sixth, a person must deny self-reasoning — the flesh constantly argues and protests against suffering (Mark 2:8): "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts?" These kinds of objections will arise in our hearts:

Objection: Persecution is painful.

Answer: Yes, but it is blessed (James 1:12): "Blessed is the man who endures trial." The cross is heavy — but the sharper the cross, the brighter the crown.

Objection: But it is hard to give up possessions and loved ones.

Answer: Christ is better than all of it. He is manna to strengthen, wine to comfort, and salvation to crown.

Objection: But freedom is sweet.

Answer: This confinement opens the way to a deeper freedom (Psalm 4:1): "You have relieved me in my distress." When the feet are bound in chains, the heart can be freely opened and enlarged.

This is how we must silence the self-reasoning that naturally rises in the heart against suffering.

This self-denying heart is very difficult to achieve — it is like plucking out a right eye. As one writer says, a person has more to do overcoming himself than overcoming men and devils combined. The one who overcomes himself is stronger than the one who captures the mightiest walls. Self is the idol. And how hard it is to sacrifice this idol — to turn self-seeking into self-denial! But as difficult as it is, it is absolutely necessary for suffering. A Christian must first lay down self before he can take up the cross.

How far from being ready to suffer, then, are those who cannot deny themselves in the smallest things — in their food or clothing! Those who, instead of disciplining the flesh, pamper it. Instead of taking up the cross, they take up their cups. Is this self-denial — to give the flesh free rein? It is certain: those who cannot deny themselves will, if suffering comes, deny Christ. Christians, if you ever want to be able to carry Christ's cross, begin now to deny yourselves. Consider these two things:

First, whatever you give up for Christ, you will find again — multiplied — in Christ (Matthew 19:29): "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life." This is an excellent return. Is it not gain enough to receive a hundredfold — far more than one gave up?

Second, it is only fair that you deny yourself for Christ — for Christ denied Himself for you. He denied His joy — He left His Father's side. He denied His honor — He endured shame

(Hebrews 12:2). He denied His life — He poured out His blood as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross (Colossians 1:20). Christ denied Himself for you. Will you not deny yourself for Him?

Third, self-denial is the clearest mark of a thoroughly committed Christian. Hypocrites may have great knowledge and make bold professions of faith — but only the true-hearted saint can actually deny himself for Christ. I have read of a holy man once tempted by Satan. Satan said to him: "Why do you take all this trouble? You watch, you fast, you abstain from sin. What do you do that I do not? Are you not a drunkard or an adulterer? Neither am I. Do you keep watch? I never sleep. Do you fast? I never eat. What do you do more than I?" The man replied: "I will tell you, Satan. I pray, I serve the Lord, and above all — I deny myself." "Indeed," said Satan, "there you surpass me, for I exalt myself." And with that he vanished. Self-denial is the best test of sincerity. By this you go beyond what any hypocrite can do.

Fourth, denying yourself is simply following the path that others have walked before you. Moses was a self-denier — he refused the honors and wealth of the royal court (Hebrews 11:25). Abraham denied his homeland at God's call (Hebrews 11:8). Marcus Arethusus, who lived during the reign of Julian the emperor, endured terrible torments for his faith. If he had given merely a halfpenny toward the rebuilding of a pagan temple, he would have been set free. But he refused — even though that small amount could have saved his life. Here was a true self-denying saint.

Fifth, the time is coming when, if you do not give up the world for Christ, the world will give you up. The world already withholds real satisfaction — and soon it will deny you shelter. It will not al-

low you so much as to breathe in it; it will dispossess you completely. And worse than that: not only will the world deny you, but Christ will deny you (Matthew 10:33): "Whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven."

Seventh, develop the graces that sustain suffering — three in particular.

1. Faith. 2. Love. 3. Patience.

First, the key suffering grace is faith (Ephesians 6:16): "Above all, taking up the shield of faith." Claiming to have faith is one thing; using it is another. The hypocrite uses faith as a cloak; the martyr uses it as a shield. A shield is valuable in the moment of danger — it covers the head and protects what is vital. Faith is exactly that kind of shield. It is a furnace-tested grace (1 Peter 1:7): "Though it is tested with fire, it is found to result in praise and glory." Faith, like Hercules's club, beats down all opposition. By faith we resist the devil (1 Peter 5:9). By faith the saints resisted to the point of bloodshed (Hebrews 11:34). Faith is a victorious grace. The believer will see Christ's crown advance, even if it means being reduced to ashes. An unbeliever is like Reuben — "unstable as water, he shall not excel" (Genesis 49:4). But a believer is like Joseph, who, though the archers aimed at him, held his bow steady in strength. Cast a believer onto the waters of affliction, and he can follow Christ on the water without sinking. Cast him into the fire, and his zeal burns hotter than the flames. Cast him into prison, and his spirit is set free. Paul and Silas sang in their prison. The promise stands (Psalm 91:13): "You shall tread on the lion and the cobra." A Christian armed with faith like a coat of armor can trample on persecutions as fierce as a lion and as venomous as a snake. Get faith.

Question: But why is faith such proven armor?

Answer: For six reasons.

First, faith unites the soul to Christ, and that blessed Head sends His strength into the members (Philippians 4:13): "I can do all things through Christ." Faith is a grace that lives entirely on what it draws from outside itself. When we need water, we go to the well. When we need gold, we go to the mine. In the same way, faith goes to Christ and draws His strength into the soul — enabling it to both act and endure. This is why faith is such a wonder-working grace.

Second, faith works into the heart a holy contempt for the world. Faith gives us an accurate picture of it (Ecclesiastes 2:11). Faith shows the world as it truly is — stripped of its jewels, seen in its plain reality. Faith makes the world appear in eclipse. The believer sees more eclipses than any astronomer. Faith shows the soul something better than the world. It gives a vision of Christ and glory — a clear view of heaven. Like a sailor who, on a dark night, climbs to the top of the mast and cries out, "I see a star!" — faith climbs above the reach of sense and reason into heaven itself, and sees Christ, that bright morning star. And once the soul has glimpsed His surpassing beauty, it becomes crucified to the world. The Christian says: "Shall I not gladly lose all these things, so that I may gain Jesus Christ?"

Third, faith draws strength from the promises. Faith lives within a promise. Take a fish out of water and it dies. Take faith out of a promise and it cannot survive. The promises are breasts of comfort — and as a baby draws strength by nursing, so faith draws strength by feeding on a promise. When a garrison is under siege

and about to surrender to the enemy, reinforcements arrive to relieve it. In the same way, when faith grows weak and is about to give out in the day of battle, the promises rally their forces — all of them come to faith's aid — and faith finds the strength to hold on through the fiery trial.

Fourth, faith gives the soul a true understanding of suffering. Faith draws an accurate picture of what suffering really is. What is suffering? Faith answers: it is the suffering of the body — that body which by the ordinary course of nature must soon turn to dust anyway. Persecution can only take my life. A fever can do as much. By giving the soul a true perspective on suffering and rightly sizing it up, faith enables a Christian to lay down his life at the feet of Christ.

Fifth, faith reconciles God's providences with His promises. Consider Paul's voyage: God's providence seemed to work against him — a violent wind called Euroclydon arose (Acts 27:14). But God had given him a promise that he and all who sailed with him would be saved (verse 24). So no matter how contrary the wind blew, Paul believed it would still bring him to the harbor in the end. In the same way, when our senses say, "Here is a painful providence — suffering has come; I will be ruined" — faith replies: "All things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). This providence, however painful, will fulfill the promise. Affliction will work for my good — it will heal my corruption and save my soul. By bringing wind and tide into agreement — the wind of providence and the tide of promise — faith enables a Christian to endure persecution.

Sixth, faith draws sweetness out of the cross. Faith shows the soul that God is reconciled and sin forgiven — and with that assurance, how sweet even suffering becomes. The bee gathers the sweetest honey from the bitterest flower. In the same way, faith gathers the sweetest comfort from the sharpest trials. Faith sees suffering as a token of God's love. "Afflictions," says Nazianzene, "are sharp arrows — but they are shot from the hand of a loving Father." Faith can taste honey at the tip of the rod. Faith draws joy out of suffering (John 16:20). It finds a honeycomb in the belly of the lion and a jewel under the cross. So you can see why faith is such proven armor. "Above all, taking up the shield of faith." A believer who has cast his anchor in heaven cannot sink in the waters of persecution.

Second, the key suffering grace is love. Get your heart set ablaze with love for the Lord Jesus. Love is a grace that is both active and passive.

First, love is active — it lays a compelling obligation on the soul (2 Corinthians 5:14): "The love of Christ controls us." Love is the wing that lifts the soul into action and the weight that keeps it moving. Love never thinks it has done enough for Christ — just as someone who loves the world never thinks he can work hard enough for it. Love is tireless. The only thing that tires it is its own slowness.

Second, love is passive — it enables a person to endure. A person who loves his friend will suffer anything rather than see his friend wronged. The Curtii laid down their lives for Rome because they loved it. Love moved our dear Lord to suffer for us. As the pelican, out of love for her young ones who have been bitten by serpents, feeds them with her own blood to restore them — so Christ,

when we had been bitten by the old serpent, fed us with His own blood to restore us. Jacob's love for Rachel made him willing to risk his life for her. "Many waters cannot quench love" (Song of Solomon 8:7) — not even the waters of persecution. "Love is as strong as death" (Song of Solomon 8:6). Death forces its way through every obstacle — and love will force its way to Christ through the prison and the furnace. But everyone claims to love Christ. How can we know whether our love is the kind that will hold firm through suffering?

First, true love is a love of friendship — genuine and open-hearted, loving Christ for who He is. There is a mercenary and calculating love that loves divine things for what they can bring. A person might love truth because it brings him prestige. A person might love Christ because He promises glory. But true love is when we love Christ for His loveliness itself — for the infinite, surpassing beauty that shines in Him — the way a person loves fine wine simply for its own taste.

Second, true love is a love of longing — desiring to be united to Christ as the source of all happiness. Love desires union. The soul that loves Christ actually longs for death, because death brings dissolution of the body and union with Him. Death unties one knot and ties another.

Third, true love is a love of goodwill — laboring, as much as we are able, to lift Christ's name high in the world. As the wise men brought Him gold and frankincense (Matthew 2:11), so we bring Him our tribute of service — willing for Him to rise even if it costs our own fall. In short, the love that is kindled from heaven makes us give Christ first place in our affections (Song of Solomon 8:2): "I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my

pomegranates." If the bride has a finer cup, Christ shall drink from it. We can never love Christ too much. We may love gold in excess — but not Christ. Even the angels do not love Christ to the full measure of His worth. When love is heated to this level, it will enable us to suffer. "Love is as strong as death." The martyrs first burned in love — and then in fire.

Third, the key suffering grace is patience. Patience is a grace made and shaped precisely for suffering — it is a sweet submission to God's will, by which we are content to bear whatever He is pleased to lay upon us. Patience makes a Christian invincible. It is like the anvil that absorbs every blow. We cannot even be fully human without patience. Uncontrolled emotion strips a person of his reason. And we cannot be martyrs without patience — patience is what enables us to endure (James 5:10). We read in Revelation 13:2 of a beast like a leopard, with feet like a bear, and the dragon giving it his power. This beast represents the antichristian power — comparable to a leopard for cunning and ferocity. On his head was the name of blasphemy (verse 1), matching the description of the man of sin (2 Thessalonians 2:4): "He sits in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God." The dragon gave him his power (verse 2) — that is, the devil — and it was given to him to make war with the saints (Revelation 13:7). So how do the saints bear the heat of this fiery trial? Verse 10 gives the answer: "Here is the patience of the saints." Patience overcomes by enduring. A Christian without patience is like a soldier without weapons. Faith keeps the heart from sinking; patience keeps the heart from complaining. Patience is not provoked by injuries — it feels them but does not become bitter over them. Patience keeps its eye on the end of suffering. Its motto is: God will bring even these things to

an end. As the watchman waits through the night for the first light of morning, so the patient Christian suffers and waits, until the day of glory begins to dawn. Faith says, "God will come." Patience says, "I will wait His pleasure." These are the suffering graces that are a Christian's proven armor.

Eighth, store up the promises that sustain in suffering. The promises are faith's floats that keep it from sinking, the milk a Christian lives on in times of trial, the honey at the end of the rod. Hoard up promises.

First, God has promised wisdom and guidance in that hour — that He will give the right words to say (Luke 21:15): "I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." You will not need to prepare — God will put the answer in your mouth. Many of God's suffering people can testify to this. God has suddenly placed words in their mouths that their enemies could more easily criticize than actually refute.

Second, God has promised protection (Acts 18:9): "No one will attack you to harm you." How safe Paul was when omnipotence itself was his shield! And (Luke 21:18): "Not a hair of your head will perish." Persecutors are lions — but they are chained lions.

Third, God has promised His special presence with His people in suffering (Psalm 91:15): "I will be with him in trouble." If we have such a Friend to visit us in prison, we will do well enough. Though we change our location, we will not lose our Keeper: "I will be with him." God will hold our head and heart when we are about to faint! What does it matter if we have more affliction than others, if we have more of God's company? God's honor is precious to Him. It would not honor Him to bring His children into suffering

and then abandon them there. He will be with them to encourage and sustain them. Indeed, when fresh troubles arise, the promise stands (Job 5:19): "In six troubles He will be with you."

Fourth, God has promised deliverance (Psalm 91:15): "I will deliver him and honor him." God will open a back door for His people to escape from their sufferings (1 Corinthians 10:13): "With the temptation He will also provide the way of escape." He did this for Peter (Acts 12:10): Peter's prayers had opened heaven, and God's angel opened the prison. God can either prevent a trap from being set, or break it once it is (Psalm 68:20): "To God the Lord belong the escapes from death." He who can strengthen our faith can also break our chains. Sometimes God even turns the enemies themselves into the instruments for breaking the very traps they laid (Esther 8:8).

Fifth, in the case of martyrdom, God has promised consolation (John 16:22): "Your sorrow will be turned into joy." Water is turned into wine. Acts 23:11: "Be of good cheer, Paul." In times of persecution, God opens the cask of spiritual consolation. Strong drink is kept for those who are fainting. Philip, Landgrave of Hesse, testified that he had experienced divine consolations such as the martyrs felt. Stephen saw the heavens opened (Acts 7:56). Glover, that blessed martyr, cried out at the stake in a holy ecstasy: "He is come! He is come!" — meaning the Comforter.

Sixth, God has promised compensation. He will abundantly repay all our sufferings — a hundredfold in this life, and everlasting life in the world to come (Matthew 19:29). Augustine calls this the best and most profitable investment possible. Our losses for Christ

are gains (Matthew 10:39): "Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." These suffering promises we should store up, and by prayerful meditation draw sweetness and strength from them.

Set before your eyes examples of suffering — look to others as patterns to follow (James 5:10): "Take, my brothers, the prophets as an example of suffering and patience." Examples move us more than precepts. Instruction tells us what to do; examples stir us to do it. Just as handlers show elephants the blood of grapes and mulberries to make them fight more fiercely, so the Holy Spirit sets before us the blood of saints and martyrs to kindle a spirit of zeal and courage in us. Micaiah was thrown into prison, Jeremiah into the dungeon, Isaiah was sawn in two. The early Christians — though their flesh was boiled, roasted, and torn apart — remained invincible like iron. Their zeal and patience in suffering so astonished their persecutors that the tormentors grew weary before the martyrs did. When John Huss was brought to be burned, they placed on his head a paper crown printed with red devils. Seeing it, he said: "My Lord Jesus Christ wore a crown of thorns for me — why should I not wear this crown, however shameful?" Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, when brought before the proconsul who commanded him to deny Christ and swear by the emperor, replied: "I have served Christ for eighty-six years, and He has never once wronged me — shall I deny Him now?" Sanders, that blessed martyr, said: "Welcome, the cross of Christ! My Savior began with me in a bitter cup — shall I not drink it with Him?" Baynham said: "You who look for miracles — I feel no more pain in this fire than if I were lying in a bed of down." Another martyr said: "The ringing of my chains has been sweet music in my ears. What a comforter is a good conscience!" Another, kissing the stake, said: "I shall not

lose my life — I shall exchange it for a better. Instead of coals, I shall have pearls!" Another, when the chains were being fastened around him, said: "Blessed be God for this wedding girdle!" These examples of suffering we should store in our hearts. God is still the same God — with as much love in His heart to comfort us, and as much strength in His arm to help us. Consider also the courage that even unbelievers displayed in their sufferings. Julius Caesar, when warned of a conspiracy against him in the Senate, answered that he would rather die than live in fear. Mutius Scevola held his hand in the fire until the flesh burned and the sinews began to shrink, and bore it with an unshaken spirit. Quintus Curtius records that Lysimachus, condemned to be thrown naked before a lion, when the lion came roaring at him, wrapped his shirt around his arm, thrust it into the lion's mouth, seized the lion's tongue, and killed it. If nature could infuse such courage and boldness into unbelievers — how much more should grace do so in Christians! Let us share Paul's resolve (Acts 20:24): "I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus."

Store up sustaining thoughts about suffering — a wise Christian thinks ahead and is prepared.

Consider who we suffer for: it is for Christ, and we cannot suffer for a better friend. Many people will suffer shame and death for their sinful desires — they will suffer disgrace for a drunken craving, they will face death over a thirst for revenge. Shall others die for their lusts, while we will not die for Christ? Will a person suffer for the very desires that condemn him, yet refuse to suffer for the Christ who saves him? Remember — we are taking up God's own cause, and He will not allow those who do so to come out losers. If

no one should light a fire on God's altar without it mattering (Malachi 1:10), then surely no one who sacrifices himself in the fire for God will do so for nothing.

It is a great honor to suffer persecution. It is a great honor to be chosen to bear witness to the truth (Acts 5:41): "They departed from the council, rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for His name." Kings have been given the title "defender of the faith." A martyr is in a special sense a defender of the faith. Kings defend the faith with their swords; martyrs defend it with their blood. What an honor to belong to Christ's trained regiment! A bloodied cross is more honorable than a purple robe. Persecution is called the fiery trial (1 Peter 4:12). God has two fires — one where He puts His gold, and another where He puts His dross. The fire for His dross is hell; the fire for His gold is the fire of persecution. God honors His gold by putting it in the fire (1 Peter 1:7). Persecution is both a badge of our order and a sign of our coming glory. What greater honor can be given to a mortal person than to stand in the cause of God — and not merely to die in the Lord, but to die for the Lord? Ignatius called his chains his spiritual pearls. Paul gloried more in his iron chain than he would have in a chain of gold (Acts 28:20).

Consider what Jesus Christ endured for us. Calvin says Christ's entire life was a series of sufferings. Christian, what is your suffering compared to His? Are you poor? So was Christ (Matthew 8:20): "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Are you surrounded by enemies? So was Christ (Acts 4:27): "Against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, gathered together." Do your enemies claim to be the

religious ones? So did His (Matthew 27:6): "The chief priests took the silver pieces and said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money.'" Godly persecutors! Are you mocked? So was Christ (Matthew 27:29): "They knelt before Him and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'" Are you slandered? So was Christ (Matthew 9:34): "He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons." Are you treated with contempt? So was Christ (Mark 14:65): "Some began to spit on Him." Are you betrayed by a friend? So was Christ (Luke 22:48): "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" Is your property taken from you — divided among those who oppose you? So was Christ's (Matthew 27:35): "They divided His garments among them by casting lots." Do you suffer unjustly? So did Christ — His own judge declared Him innocent (Luke 23:4): "I find no fault in this Man." Are you dragged away to suffer? So was Christ (Matthew 27:2): "When they had bound Him, they led Him away." Do you face death? So did Christ (Luke 23:33): "When they came to Calvary, there they crucified Him." Christ bore not only the physical agony of the cross, but the curse of the cross (Galatians 3:13). His soul was "exceedingly sorrowful, to the point of death" (Matthew 26:38). His soul was overshadowed by the cloud of God's displeasure. The Greek church, when speaking of Christ's sufferings, calls them "unknown sufferings" — depths no human mind can fathom. Did the Lord Jesus endure all this for us — and shall we refuse to suffer persecution for His name? Say with holy Ignatius: "I am willing to die for Christ, for Christ my love was crucified." Our cup is nothing compared to the cup Christ drank. His was mixed with the wrath of God. If He bore God's wrath for us, surely we can bear the wrath of men for Him.

By suffering, we bring great honor to Christ and the Gospel. It honors Christ that He has soldiers enlisted under Him who will leave everything for His sake. It proclaims Him to be a good Master when His servants are willing to wear His uniform, even when it is stained with disgrace and soaked in blood. Paul's iron chain caused the Gospel to wear a golden chain. Tertullian says that the saints of his time received their sufferings with more gratitude than they would have felt at receiving a rescue. What a glory it was to the truth when they dared to embrace it in the flames! The sufferings of the saints not only adorn the Gospel — they spread it. The zeal and steadfastness of the martyrs in the early church moved some pagans to become Christians.

The showers of blood have always made the church fruitful (Philippians 1:13): Paul's being in chains caused the truth to spread more widely. The Gospel has always flourished in the ashes of martyrs.

Suffering is what we committed ourselves to at baptism — that was where we received our commission. We solemnly vowed to be true to Christ's cause and to fight under His banner until death. How many times at the Lord's Supper have we renewed our oath of allegiance to Jesus Christ — pledging to be His devoted servants, and that death would not separate us from Him? If, when the moment comes, we refuse to suffer persecution for His name, Christ will bring our baptism vow as an indictment against us. Christ is called the Captain of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10). We have signed on and enlisted under this Captain. If we flee from His colors out of fear, it is perjury of the highest order. An oath that is not kept without fail will be punished without fail.

Our sufferings are light (2 Corinthians 4:17): "This light and momentary affliction." It feels heavy to flesh and blood, but it is light to faith. Affliction is light in three senses.

First, affliction is light compared to sin. The person who feels sin as truly heavy finds suffering relatively light. Sin made Paul cry out: "Wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7). He did not cry out about his iron chain — he cried out about his sin. A louder noise drowns out a quieter one. When the sea roars, the rivers fall silent. The person who is truly burdened by his sins — who sees how he has provoked God — finds the weight of affliction bearable (Micah 7:9).

Second, affliction is light compared to hell. What is persecution compared to damnation? What is the fire of martyrdom compared to the fire of the condemned? It is no more than the prick of a pin compared to a fatal wound. "Who knows the power of Your anger?" (Psalm 90:11). Christ Himself could not have borne that anger if He had not been more than a man.

Third, affliction is light compared to glory. The weight of coming glory makes present persecution feel light. Chrysostom says that if all the suffering of every person who has ever lived could be placed upon a single person, it would not be worth one hour of being in heaven. Since persecution is light, let us treat it as such. Let us neither sink through unbelief nor burn with impatience.

Our sufferings are brief (1 Peter 5:10): "After you have suffered a little while." Our sufferings may continue for a time, but they will not continue forever. Affliction is compared to a cup (Lamentations 4:21). The wicked drink from a sea of wrath that has no bottom and will never be emptied. But for us it is only a cup

of suffering — and God will say: "Let this cup pass away." "The scepter of wickedness shall not rest upon the land of the righteous" (Psalm 125:3). The rod may rest there for a time — but it will not stay. Though persecution has a sting to wound, it also has wings to fly away. "Sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 35:10). The time is coming — and it is not far — when the saints will be given their release. They will weep no more, suffer no more. They will be taken off the torturing rack and laid in Christ's embrace. God's people will not always be in the iron furnace. A year of jubilee will come.

While we suffer for Christ, we suffer with Christ (Romans 8:17): "If we suffer with Him..." Jesus Christ bears part of the suffering alongside us. A believer can say: I am not alone. My Christ is with me — He carries the heaviest end of the cross. "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). "Underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33:27). If Christ puts the yoke of persecution on us, He also puts His arms beneath us. The Lord Jesus will not only crown us when we conquer — He will enable us to conquer. When the dragon fights against the godly, Christ is the Michael who stands up for them and helps them overcome (Daniel 12:1).

The person who refuses to suffer persecution will never be free from suffering.

He faces inward suffering. The person who will not suffer for the sake of conscience will suffer in conscience. Francis Spira is a sobering example. After renouncing the doctrine he once professed out of fear, he fell into overwhelming terror and was reduced to a

mere skeleton. He confessed he felt the very torments of the damned in his soul. He who was afraid of the stake was put on the rack of conscience.

He also faces outward suffering. Pendleton refused to suffer for Christ — and not long after, his house caught fire and he burned in it. He who would not burn for Christ was made to burn for his sins.

And ultimately, he faces eternal suffering: "suffering the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 7).

Present sufferings cannot keep a person from being blessed. "Blessed are those who are persecuted" (Matthew 5:10). We tend to think: blessed are those who are rich. But no — blessed are those who are persecuted. "Blessed is the man who endures trial" (James 1:12). "If you suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed" (1 Peter 3:14).

That persecution cannot prevent us from being blessed, I will demonstrate in four ways.

Those are blessed who have God as their God (Psalm 144:15): "Happy is the people whose God is the Lord." But persecution cannot take God from us (Daniel 3:17): "Our God is able to deliver us." Though persecuted, they could still say: Our God. Therefore, persecution cannot keep us from being blessed.

Those are blessed whom God loves. But persecution cannot separate us from God's love (Romans 8:35): "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall persecution?" A goldsmith loves his gold just as much when it is in the furnace as when it is in his safe. God visits His children in prison (Acts 23:11): "Be of good cheer, Paul." God sweetens their sufferings (2 Corinthians 1:5): "As the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives, so also through

Christ our comfort overflows." As a mother gives her child a lump of sugar after a bitter pill — persecution is the bitter pill, but God gives the comforts of His Spirit to sweeten it. If persecution cannot cut off God's love, then it cannot prevent us from being blessed.

Those are blessed for whom Christ intercedes. And those who are persecuted have Christ praying for them (John 17:12): "Keep through Your name those whom You have given Me." If persecution cannot stop Christ's prayer for us, then it cannot obstruct our blessedness.

Those are blessed whose sin is being purged out. But persecution purges out sin (Isaiah 27:9; Hebrews 12:11). Persecution is a caustic that eats away proud flesh. It is a winnowing fan, a refining fire. Persecution is the medicine God applies to His children to carry away what is unhealthy in them. That which purges out sin surely cannot prevent blessedness.

The greatest sustaining thought in suffering is the glorious reward that follows: "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The hope of reward is a powerful motivator (Hebrews 11:26): Moses had his eye on the recompense of reward. A merchant does not dwell on a few storms at sea — he thinks of the profit when the ship comes home loaded. In the same way, a Christian should not be overwhelmed by present sufferings, but keep his mind fixed on the rich reward awaiting him at the heavenly harbor. "Great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:12). The cross is a golden ladder by which we climb up to heaven. A Christian may lose his life, but not his reward. He may lose his head, but not his crown. If the one who gives a cup of cold water will not lose his reward, then far less will

the one who gives a draft of warm blood. The reward of glory should sweeten all the bitter waters. It should be a spur to martyrdom.

Not that we can earn this reward through our sufferings (Revelation 2:10): "I will give you the crown of life." The reward is the legacy that free grace bequeaths. What possible proportion is there between a drop of blood and a weight of glory? Christ Himself, considered purely as man — setting aside His divine nature — did not merit by His sufferings. First, Christ as man was a creature, and a creature cannot merit from the Creator. Second, Christ's sufferings as man were finite, and finite suffering cannot earn infinite glory. As God, His sufferings were fully meritorious. But considered as man alone, they were not. I raise this point directly against the Roman Catholic position: if Christ's sufferings as man — though as man He was above the angels — could not merit anything on their own, then what prophet, martyr, or human being on earth can merit anything by suffering?

Though we have no reward by merit, we will receive it by grace (Matthew 5:12): "Great is your reward in heaven." The thought of this reward should strengthen every Christian. Look upon the crown — and then try to faint. The reward is as far above your thoughts as it is beyond your deserts. A man who must wade through deep water keeps his eyes fixed on the solid ground ahead. While Christians wade through the deep waters of persecution, they should fix the eyes of faith on the land of promise. Those who bear the cross with patience will wear the crown with triumph.

Christ's suffering saints will receive greater degrees of glory (Matthew 19:28). God has His highest seats — even His thrones — reserved for His martyrs. It is true that even the least in heaven —

the one who stands at the door — will have more than enough. But as Joseph gave Benjamin a double portion above his brothers, so God will give His suffering people a double portion of glory. Some spheres in heaven are higher, some stars brighter. God's martyrs will shine with greater brilliance in the heavenly sky.

Keep the coming reward often before your eyes. All the silks of Persia, the spices of Arabia, and the gold of Ophir cannot be compared to this glorious reward. When Basil was threatened with exile, he comforted himself with the thought that he would either be under heaven or in heaven. It was the hope of this reward that so energized the early martyrs. When incense was placed in their hands and all they needed to do to save their lives was sprinkle a little of it on an altar to honor an idol, they would rather die than do it. This glorious heavenly reward is described as reigning with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12): "If we endure, we will also reign with Him." First martyrs, then kings. After the saints' crucifixion comes their coronation — they will reign. The wicked reign first and then suffer. The godly suffer first and then reign. Who would not swim through blood for that crown? Christ says: "Rejoice and be glad" (Matthew 5:12). Christians should have their spirits lifted and their hearts filled with joy when they think of the weight of glory awaiting them.

If you want to be able to suffer, pray much. Ask God to clothe you with a spirit of zeal and boldness. "It has been granted to you for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29). The ability to suffer is a gift of God — pray for this gift. Do not imagine that you can lay down life and liberty for Christ in your own strength. Peter was overconfident about himself (John 13:37): "I will lay down my life for You." Peter

had habitual grace, but he lacked the moment-by-moment sustaining grace he needed. Christians need fresh impulses from heaven. Pray for the Spirit to strengthen you in your sufferings. As fire hardens the potter's clay — which is soft and pliable at first — so the fire of the Spirit hardens believers against suffering. Pray that God will make you like the anvil, able to absorb the blows of persecutors with unshakable patience.

CHAPTER 22



1 John 5:3 — "His commandments are not burdensome."
An appendix to the Beatitudes.

You have seen what Christ calls us to: poverty of spirit, purity of heart, meekness, mercifulness, joyful endurance of persecution, and more. So that no one should hesitate or be put off by these commands of Christ, I thought it fitting to close the previous discussion by addressing the objections and reservations in people's hearts — through this sweet and encouraging text: "His commandments are not burdensome."

The world objects that religion is demanding and oppressive (Malachi 1:13): "What a weariness it is!" So the Lord, in order to draw us toward obedience, presents religion in its true and beautiful colors. He shows it to be attractive and pleasant in these words: "His commandments are not burdensome." This verse is a sweetening element in religion — it removes the harshness and severity that the worldly-minded project onto God's ways.

To clarify the terms, let us consider two things.

What is meant here by "commandments"?

By this word I understand the Gospel's requirements: faith, repentance, self-denial, and the like.

What is meant by "not burdensome"?

The Greek word means not tedious or heavy to carry. The expression is an understatement — "His commands are not burdensome" actually means they are easy, sweet, and excellent.

Notice: none of God's commands are burdensome. When He calls us to be meek, merciful, and pure in heart, these commands are not burdensome (Matthew 11:30): "My burden is light." The Greek word for burden there refers to the ballast of a ship — which allows the ship to glide through the waves so swiftly and smoothly that it seems to carry no weight at all. Christ's commands are like that ballast — useful, but not oppressive. All His precepts are sweet and easy, which is why they are called "pleasant ways" (Proverbs 3:17). To illustrate this, consider two things.

First, why Christ places commands on His people. Second, that these commands are not burdensome.

Why does Christ place commands on His people? There are two reasons.

First, in regard to Christ Himself: it fits His dignity and authority. He is the supreme Lord. This title is written on His robe and on His thigh: "King of Kings" (Revelation 19:16). Should not a King establish laws for His subjects? Enacting laws and statutes is one of the royal privileges — one of the crown jewels of sovereignty. Should not Christ, through whom kings reign (Proverbs 8:15), issue His royal decrees by which the world is governed?

Second, in regard to the saints: it is good for God's people to have laws that bind and restrain the unruly tendencies of their hearts. How wildly would a grapevine spread its branches if it were never pruned and trained? In the same way, the heart would run wild in sin if it did not have affliction to prune it and Christ's laws to guide it. Christ's precepts are called a yoke (Matthew 11:30). A yoke is useful — it keeps the oxen from straying and running off. Similarly, Christ's precepts keep the godly from wandering into sin. Where would we not end up — into what destructive beliefs and practices — if Christ's laws did not check and restrain us? Blessed be God for His precepts. That is a blessed yoke that restrains our corruption. Without this yoke, we would run straight to hell. Christ's laws are a spiritual fence that keeps God's people within the pastures of His ordinances. Some who have broken through that fence and wandered are now grazing in the devil's pasture.

The second thing to demonstrate is that Christ's commands are not burdensome. I grant that they are burdensome to an unregenerate person. To mourn over sin, to be pure in heart, to endure persecution for righteousness' sake — all of this is hard to flesh and blood. This is why Christ's commands are compared in Psalm 2 to chains and cords — because worldly-minded people experience them that way. An unregenerate person is like an untamed heifer that will not accept the yoke but kicks and bucks. To someone still in their natural state, Christ's commands feel burdensome.

Even to a child of God, to the degree that corruption still holds sway — for he is only partially renewed — Christ's laws can feel burdensome at times. The flesh protests that it cannot pray or endure suffering. The sinful inclinations of the body fight against

Christ's law. But the spiritual part prevails and brings the flesh into submission to what Christ requires. A renewed person, in the degree to which he has been renewed, does not find God's commandments burdensome. To him they are not a weight but a delight.

God's commands are not burdensome when we consider them rightly, for eight reasons.

First, a Christian consents to God's commands — and so they are not burdensome (Romans 7:16): "I agree with the law, that the law is good." What is done with wholehearted agreement is easy. A godly person approves of Christ's laws in his mind and consents to them in his will — and so they are not burdensome. A wicked person is like a slave chained to a galley, forced to work whether he wants to or not — pulling the rope and rowing under compulsion. But a godly person is like a free citizen who consents to his sovereign's laws and obeys by choice, recognizing their fairness and wisdom. A grace-filled heart sees such beauty and rightness in heaven's commands that it draws forth genuine consent — and that consent makes them not burdensome.

Second, they are Christ's commands — and that is why they are not burdensome. "Take My yoke upon you" (Matthew 11:29). The commands of the Gospel are not the laws of a tyrant but of a Savior. A husband's commands are not burdensome to a wife who loves him — she desires to obey. In the same way, a grace-filled soul says: "Lord, if it is You who asks me to mourn over sin and long for purity of heart — if it is You, dear Savior, who bids me do these things — I will obey with gladness." "Your commandments are not burdensome." A soldier advances bravely at the word of his general.

Third, Christians obey out of love — and when love is the motive, God's commandments are not burdensome. This is why Scripture joins serving and loving God together (Isaiah 56:6). Nothing feels burdensome to the one who loves. Love lightens any load and adds wings to obedience. A heart that loves God finds nothing tedious except its own sluggishness and slowness. Love makes sin feel heavy and Christ's burden feel light.

Fourth, a Christian is carried along by the help of the Spirit — and the Spirit makes every duty manageable (Romans 8:26): "The Spirit helps us in our weakness." The Spirit works in us both the desire and the ability to obey (Philippians 2:13). When God enables us to do what He commands, His commandments are not burdensome. When two carry a load, it is lighter. The Spirit of God helps us perform our duties and bear our burdens — drawing alongside us, as it were, in the same yoke. When a teacher guides a child's hand and helps it form each letter, writing is not hard for the child. When the Holy Spirit, like a divine magnet, draws and moves the heart, obedience is not hard. When a bird is given wings, it can fly. Though the soul on its own cannot do what is good, it has been given two wings — the wing of faith and the wing of the Spirit — and now it flies swiftly in obedience (Ezekiel 1:1). The heart rises toward God in prayer when the Spirit lifts it. The sails of a windmill cannot move on their own — but when the wind blows, they turn rapidly. When a breath of the Spirit blows on the soul, the sails of our affections move swiftly in duty.

Fifth, all of Christ's commands are beneficial — and therefore not burdensome (Deuteronomy 10:12-13): "What does the Lord your God require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to love Him... to keep the commandments of the Lord... for your good?"

Christ's commands carry blessing within them — salvation runs through every precept. Obeying Christ's laws is not so much a duty as a privilege. All of Christ's commands point toward blessedness. Medicine is unpleasant in itself, yet because it restores health no one refuses it. God's precepts may feel demanding to the flesh, yet since their effect is to make us both holy and happy, they are not to be counted burdensome. An apprentice gladly wrestles with the hard demands of learning his trade because it will ennoble and advance him. Suffering that leads to a crown is not grievous. This is what led Paul to say: "I take pleasure in weaknesses, in persecutions" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Sixth, it is an honor to be under Christ's commands — and therefore they are not burdensome. Christ's precepts do not weigh us down; they adorn us. It is an honor to be employed in Christ's service. How cheerfully the oarsmen rowed the barge that carried Caesar! Honor makes labor easy. A crown of gold is heavy in itself, but the dignity it represents makes it light and easy to wear. I may say of every command of Christ what Solomon says of wisdom (Proverbs 4:9): "She will give to your head a garland of grace; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown." It is an honor to work at the royal court. The honor of Christ's yoke makes it easy and desirable.

Seventh, Christ's commands are sweetened with joy — and that makes them not burdensome. Cicero asks whether anything can properly be called a burden if it is carried with joy and pleasure. When the wheels of a chariot are oiled, they turn freely. When God pours in the oil of gladness, how swiftly the soul runs in the ways of His commandments! Joy gives strength for duty (Nehemiah

8:10): "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Greater strength means less weariness. God sometimes pours down comfort — and then a Christian runs freely in the yoke.

Eighth, Gospel commands are temporary — and therefore not burdensome. Christ will not be laying commands on us forever. He will soon take the yoke from our neck and place a crown upon our head. A time is coming when we will be free not only from sin but from the very forms of duty. In heaven there will be no need for prayer or repentance. Duties as we know them will end. In heaven the saints will love God — but love is no burden. In heaven the saints will praise God — but their praise will be so filled with delight that it will no longer feel like a duty at all. It will be part of their reward. It is the angels' own joy to praise God. This is one more reason Christ's commands are not burdensome: though they are spiritually demanding, they are temporary. It will not be long before duties as we know them are no more. The saints will not so much be under commands as they will be in the embrace of God.

We can also see that Christ's commands are not burdensome by comparison. Consider them alongside four other things.

The list: the severity of the moral law; the commands of sin; the torments of the condemned; and the glory of heaven.

First, Christ's Gospel commands are not burdensome compared to the severity of the moral law. The moral law was a burden neither we nor our ancestors could bear (Galatians 3:10): "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, to perform them." The gracious requirements of the Gospel are, by comparison, easy.

In the Gospel, if there is a genuine desire to keep God's commandments, that desire is accepted (Nehemiah 1:11; 2 Corinthians 8:12): "If the readiness is there, it is acceptable." Under the moral law, the best of intentions would not have been enough — actual obedience was required (Galatians 3:12). But in the Gospel, God crowns the desire. If a Christian says humbly: "Lord, I desire to obey You — I long to be more holy" — that desire, rising from love, is accepted.

In the Gospel, a guarantor is permitted. The law allowed no substitute; it required personal obedience. But now God graciously arranges it so that what we cannot do ourselves, we may do through a substitute. Christ is called the guarantor of a better covenant (Hebrews 7:22). We cannot walk perfectly — we fall short in everything. But God looks at us in our guarantor. And since Christ has fulfilled all righteousness, it is as though we ourselves had fulfilled the law.

The law commanded and threatened but gave no strength to obey. But now God couples His commands with power. Gospel precepts are sweetened with promises. God commands: "Make yourselves a new heart" (Ezekiel 18:31). Lord, can I make a new heart? I might as well be asked to make a new world. But see Ezekiel 36:26: "A new heart also will I give you." God commands us to cleanse ourselves (Isaiah 1:16): "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean." Then see the precept turned into a promise (Ezekiel 36:25): "I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols." When a child cannot walk, the father takes the child by the hand and leads it — and then walking is not hard. When we cannot walk, God takes us by the hand (Hosea 11:3): "I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms."

In the Gospel, God overlooks weakness when the heart is right. The law demanded perfect obedience. The slightest failure was enough to bring condemnation. It is the same with our best duties as with gold — put gold in the fire and you will see dross come out. But in the Gospel, while God will not excuse willful disobedience, He does pass over genuine frailty. In this way, Christ's Gospel commands are not burdensome when compared to the severity of the moral law.

Second, Christ's commands are not burdensome compared to the commands of sin. Sin lays a heavy yoke on people. Sin is compared to a talent of lead (Zechariah 5:7) — to show just how heavy it is. The demands of sin are truly oppressive. Let a person be gripped by any controlling desire — whether greed or ambition — and see how he exhausts and torments himself. "They weary themselves committing iniquity" (Jeremiah 9:5). Are not Christ's precepts easy and sweet compared to sin's harsh and relentless demands? Chrysostom rightly says that virtue is easier than vice. Temperance is less of a burden than drunkenness; doing justice is less burdensome than violence. There is more trouble and anxiety in the planning and pursuit of wicked ends than in simply obeying Christ's gentle precepts. The wicked are described as "laboring with iniquity" (Psalm 7:14) — showing the anxious effort required to carry out their wickedness. Many have taken more pain to reach hell than others have taken to reach heaven.

Third, Christ's commands are not burdensome compared to the torments of the condemned. The rich man in torment cries out: "I am in agony in this flame" (Luke 16:24). Hell's fire is so beyond comprehension that the wicked know neither how to bear it nor escape it. The torment of the condemned can be compared to a yoke

— but it differs from ordinary yokes. Usually a yoke rests only on the neck of the animal. The yoke of hell rests on every part of the sinner. His eyes will see nothing but horrifying scenes. His ears will hear only the groans and shrieks of tormented spirits. He will suffer in every member of his body and every faculty of his soul — and this agony, though violent, is perpetual. The yoke of the condemned will never be taken off. Sinners may break the golden chain of God's commands — but they cannot break the iron chain of His punishment.

Are not Gospel commands easy compared to the torments of hell? What does Christ command? He calls you to repent — is it not better to weep for sin than to bleed for it? Christ calls you to pray in your family and in private — is not praying better than crying out in anguish? He calls you to keep the Sabbath holy — is it not better to rest in the Lord than to be forever without rest? Hell is a restless place — there is not a single moment's relief from its torment. Are not Christ's commands sweet and easy compared to the unbearable suffering of the condemned? Is it not better to obey than to be damned? Are not cords of love better than chains of darkness?

Fourth, Gospel commands are not burdensome compared to the glory of heaven. What an infinite difference there is between service and reward! What are all the saints' labors and struggles in the life of faith compared to the crown that awaits them? The weight of coming glory makes every present duty feel light.

Here is an argument that should fill us with love for God's ways: "His commandments are not burdensome." Believers are no longer under the thundering curses of the law, nor under its ceremonial requirements — which were both numerous and demand-

ing. God's ways are right; His statutes are desirable. He calls us to mourn, so that we may be comforted. He calls us to be poor in spirit, so that He may settle a kingdom on us. God is no hard Master. His commandments are not burdensome. Serve God out of free choice. Think of the joy, the honor, and the reward that come with godliness. Never begrudge God your service. Whatever He commands, let your heart subscribe to it.

This rebukes those who refuse to embrace these sweet and gentle commands of Christ (Psalm 81:11): "Israel would have none of Me." Most people prefer to put their neck in the devil's yoke rather than submit to the easy and pleasant yoke of Christ. Why, when God's commandments are not burdensome — when His ways are pleasantness and His service is perfect freedom — do people still refuse to submit to Christ's rule and bow to His law?

The cause is the deep-seated hostility that naturally lives in the human heart against Christ. Sinners are called God-haters (Romans 1:30). Sin produces not merely a dislike of God's ways but active hatred. From that inward hostility flows outright rebellion (Luke 19:14): "His citizens hated him and sent a delegation saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'"

Beyond this natural hatred against Christ, the devil works to stoke the fire and inflame it further. He spreads false reports about religion — as the spies did about Canaan (Numbers 13:32): "They brought back a bad report of the land." Satan says God is a hard Master and His commandments are burdensome. It is the devil's aim — as the sons of Eli did — to make the offering of God despised (1 Samuel 2:17). The devil raises two specific prejudices in people's hearts against Christ and His ways.

The first prejudice is the small number of those who embrace religion. The path of Christ is narrow (Psalm 119:35), while the road of pleasure and vanity is wide. Many people foolishly conclude that the road most people walk must be the best road.

Few are saved — but will you refuse to be saved simply because few are saved? No one reasons this way in everyday life: there are few wealthy people, therefore I will not try to be wealthy. On the contrary, that makes him work all the harder to achieve it. Why do we not reason wisely about our souls? Few people go to heaven — therefore let us labor all the more to be among that number.

What a weak argument: few embrace religion, therefore you will not? The most excellent things are the most rare — there are few pearls and diamonds in the world. The small number of those who embrace religion is evidence of how excellent it truly is.

We are warned not to follow the crowd (Exodus 23:2). Most fish swim into the devil's net.

The second prejudice is that religion's ways are made to look ugly by the scandalous conduct of those who claim to follow it.

I acknowledge that the beauty of religion has been greatly dimmed and tarnished by the scandals of its professors. This is an age full of scandal. Many have used the appearance of religion as a key to unlock every form of ungodliness. God's name has rarely been taken in vain more freely. Our Savior foretold this (Matthew 18:7): "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come." But to clear away this prejudice, consider: first, scandals arise not from religion itself but from a lack of true religion. Second, religion is not made worse by those who abuse it. To dislike religion because some who profess it live scandalously is like saying: because the

servant is dishonest, I will think badly of his master. Is Christ less glorious because some who wear His name live disgracefully? Is religion made worse because some of its followers are wicked? Is wine made worse because some people drink too much of it? Should a woman despise chastity because some of her neighbors are unchaste? Let us reason clearly. "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24).

God sometimes allows scandals to occur in the church by design.

First, as a just judgment on hypocrites — those double-minded devotees who serve God for their own ends. God in His justice allows them to fall into disgraceful behavior, exposing their true nature to the world. Judas is the pattern: first a subtle hypocrite, then a visible traitor.

Scandals also serve to harden those who are determined to remain in sin. Some desperate sinners would never be drawn to God by religion's beauty — so they will instead be judged by its stumbling blocks. God allows scandals to function as a trap, drawing such people deeper into sin. Christ is to some a stumbling stone (Romans 9:33). His blood, which is a healing balm to some, is poison to others. If the beauty of religion does not attract people, the scandals of some of its followers will drive them further toward ruin.

Scandals in the church also serve as a warning to the godly. The Lord would have His people walk with care (Romans 11:20): "Do not be proud, but fear." The scandals of professing Christians are not meant to discourage us but to caution us. Let us step more carefully. The failures of others are warning signs for the saints to

take seriously. Let all of this serve to remove these prejudices against religion. Though Satan tries to make the Gospel look repulsive, there is beauty and glory in it. God's commandments are not burdensome.

Let me urge everyone to embrace God's ways wholeheartedly. His commandments are not burdensome. God never places a burden on us except to unburden us of our sins. His commands are our privileges. There is joy in the path of duty, and heaven waits at the end of it.

APPENDIX



FINIS.

CHRIST'S VARIOUS FULLNESS



Colossians 3:11: But Christ is all in all.

Philosophers say that every field of knowledge takes its dignity from its subject matter — the more noble the object, the more excellent the knowledge. Since Jesus Christ is the most sublime and glorious of all objects, the knowledge that leads us to Him must be the most excellent knowledge of all. It is called "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:8). This knowledge is so sweet that Paul resolved to know nothing but Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2). And indeed, what more did he need to know? For Christ is all in all.

The text contains both a negation and a positive declaration — the apostle states something negative and then something positive.

First, the negation. Paul tells the Colossians what will not profit them — "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision," and so on. Circumcision was a great privilege — a mark that distinguished God's people from those outside, a fence between the enclosed garden and the common ground. The circumcised people were a people under God's watchful care — under His eye and His wing, members of His household. Rather than let them go without, God made the heavens a storehouse and rained manna down on them.

He split the rock and made it a living spring. How glorious was circumcision! Romans 9:4-5: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants... and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ." What rich jewels hung from Israel's crown! But in matters of salvation, all of this counted for nothing — "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision." From which we may draw the following observation:

Doctrine: External privileges commend no one to God. Whether a person is wise, wealthy, or noble — none of this makes him stand out in God's sight. 1 Corinthians 1:26: "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." God does not see as man sees. We are impressed by beauty and ability, but these things carry no weight with God. God places His left hand on these things, as Jacob did on Manasseh (Genesis 48:14). God often passes over those who shine most brilliantly in the world and looks instead upon those of humbler standing. The reason is so that "no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:29). If God were to build His grace only on human wisdom and talent, people would say: "My intelligence, or my eloquence, or my social standing saved me." Therefore, not many wise and not many noble are called. God will have no boasting in His creatures.

Use: Do not rest in outward privileges or achievements. These are not foundations on which to build the hope of salvation. Many of Christ's own relatives went to hell. Paul is called "a servant of the Lord" (Romans 1:1) and James is called "the brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1:19). It is better to be the servant of the Lord than the brother of the Lord. The Virgin Mary was saved not because she was the mother of Christ, but because she was a daugh-

ter of faith. It is grace, not bloodline, that gives standing before God. A heart in which Christ has been formed is God's delight — and this brings me to the next point.

Second, the apostle makes a positive declaration: "But Christ is all in all." In these words there is:

First, the subject: Christ. His name is sweet — "like ointment poured out" (Song of Solomon 1:3). It was Job's wish: "Oh that my words were written down, that they were engraved with an iron pen on rock forever!" (Job 19:23). And it is my wish: O that this sweet name of Christ were written — engraved by the pen of the Holy Spirit on our hearts forever. The name of Christ contains, as Chrysostom says, a thousand treasuries of joy.

Second, the predicate: all in all. Christ is all fullness, all sweetness. He is everything imaginable, everything desirable. The one who has Christ can want for nothing more — for Christ is all.

The doctrine drawn from the text is this: Jesus Christ is the essence of all good things — He is all.

First, sometimes faith is said to be all (Galatians 5:6): "Nothing avails but faith." Faith is all instrumentally — as the instrument by which we lay hold of Christ and are saved, the way a drowning man is saved by grabbing hold of a branch.

Second, sometimes the new birth is said to be all (Galatians 6:15): "Nothing avails but a new creation." The new creation is all dispositionally — it prepares and qualifies us for glory. "Without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Chrysostom says that on the day of judgment, God will ask the same question Christ asked in Matthew 22:20: "Whose image and inscription is

this?" God will say: "Whose image is this?" If you cannot show Him His own image — consisting in holiness — He will reject you. In that sense, the new creation is all.

Third, here in the text Christ is said to be all — but in what sense is Christ all?

First, Christ is all by way of eminence. All good things exist in Him in their highest and fullest form — as the sun contains within itself the light of all lesser stars.

Second, Christ is all by way of distribution. All good things are transmitted and delivered to us through Christ. Just as precious goods — jewels and spices — come to us by sea, so all heavenly blessings sail to us through the Red Sea of Christ's blood. Romans 11:36: "Through Him are all things." Christ is the spiritual channel through which the golden oil of God's mercy flows into the soul.

Reason: Christ must be all — for "in Him the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9). He shares everything with God the Father. John 16:15: "All that the Father has is Mine." There is therefore in Him enough to scatter all our fears, lift every burden, and supply every need. There can be no deficiency in what is infinite.

Use 1: For instruction. This has six branches.

Branch 1: This shows us the glorious fullness of Jesus Christ — He is all in all. Christ is a complete armor, a storehouse of all spiritual riches. You may go like a bee from flower to flower, drawing a little sweetness here and there, but you will never be satisfied until you come to Christ — for He is all in all.

Specifically, Christ is all in six ways.

First, Christ is all in regard to righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30): "He is made to us righteousness." The robe of innocence, like the veil of the temple, has been torn in two. Our own righteousness is in rags. Isaiah 64:6: "Our righteous acts are like filthy rags." Just as beneath rags the naked body is exposed, so beneath the rags of our own righteousness, the body of death is visible. Our duties can be defiled by sin — but they cannot justify us. But Christ is all in regard to righteousness. Romans 10:4: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." That is, through Christ we are as righteous as if we had personally fulfilled the law in every point. Jacob received the blessing wearing the garment of his elder brother. In the same way, clothed in Christ our elder brother, we receive the blessing. Christ's righteousness is a seamless garment. 2 Corinthians 5:21: "We are made the righteousness of God in Him."

Second, Christ is all in regard to sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30): "He is made to us sanctification." Sanctification is the spiritual beauty and adornment of the soul — it is simply God placing on us the jewels of holiness. The angels are glorious through it. By it we become like the king's daughter — "all glorious within" (Psalm 45:13). Sanctification orients the soul toward heaven. It turns iron into gold. It transforms the heart, which was once Satan's portrait, into a letter written by Christ. The young women in Esther's time (Esther 2:12) had their months of purification — they were first perfumed and anointed before standing before the king. In the same way, we must first receive the anointing of God (1 John 2:27) and be perfumed with the graces of the Spirit — those sweet fragrances — and then we will stand before the King of heaven. Our days of purification must come before our days of glo-

rification. What a glorious work this is! A soul adorned with grace is like the night sky — the firmament scattered with glittering stars. I may apply to it the words of Song of Solomon 3:6: "Who is this coming up from the wilderness, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the powders of the merchant?" So we may ask: Who is this coming up out of the wilderness of sin, perfumed with all the graces of the Spirit? Holiness is God's own signature engraved on the soul. But where does this come from? Christ is all — He is made to us sanctification. He sends His Spirit into our hearts as a refiner's fire, burning away our impurities and making our graces sparkle like gold in the furnace. Christ rises on the soul "with healing in His wings" (Malachi 4:2). He heals the understanding and says, "Let there be light." He heals the heart by melting it in His blood. He heals the will by breaking off its rebellion. In this way He is all in regard to sanctification.

Third, Christ is all in regard to divine acceptance (Ephesians 1:6): "He has made us accepted in the Beloved" — that is, He has made us favorites. As Chrysostom and Theophylact render it: through Christ, God looks on us with favor and receives everything we do with goodwill.

The wicked person, being outside of Christ, is outside of favor. As his plowing is sin (Proverbs 21:4), so his praying is an abomination (Proverbs 15:8). God will not draw near to him — his breath is infected. God will hear his sins but not his prayers. But in Christ, God accepts us. Ecclesiastes 9:7: "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do." Just as Joseph presented his brothers to Pharaoh and brought them into the king's good favor (Genesis 47:2), so the Lord Jesus carries the names of the saints on His heart and

presents them before His Father, bringing them into honor and standing. Through Christ, God will deal and communicate with us. He speaks to us as in Isaiah 62:4: "You shall no more be called Forsaken, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, for the Lord delights in you." When you look through red glass, everything appears red. Through the blood of Christ, we appear beautiful and full of health in God's eyes.

Fourth, Christ is all in regard to divine assistance. A Christian's strength lies in Christ. Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Where does a Christian get the strength to fulfill his duties and resist temptation? Through Christ's strengthening. How does a spark of grace survive in a sea of corruption, with storms of persecution blowing all around? Because Christ holds that spark in the hollow of His hand. Why has the roaring lion not devoured the saints? Because the Lion of the tribe of Judah has stood in their defense. Christ gives us not only the crown but the shield — not only the prize when we overcome, but the strength by which we overcome. Revelation 12:11: "They overcame him" — that is, the accuser of the brothers — "by the blood of the Lamb." Christ guards the fortress of grace so it cannot be blown up. Peter's shield was dented, but Christ kept it from being shattered: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32) — not be entirely eclipsed. The crown of all the saints' victories must be placed on the head of Christ. Romans 8:37: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ." Write the name of Michael on all your conquests.

Fifth, Christ is all in regard to making peace. When the conscience is in agony, burning under the sense of God's wrath, Christ is all — He pours the balm of His blood into those wounds and

turns the storm into calm. Christ makes peace not only in the court of heaven but in the court of conscience. He establishes peace not only above us but within us (John 16:33): "That in Me you may have peace." Every golden stream of peace flows from this fountain. "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you" (John 14:27). Jesus Christ not only purchased peace for us but speaks it to us. He is called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Peace is a crown jewel of His reign. He whispers His love to the soul and sends His Spirit — that blessed dove — bearing an olive branch of peace in its mouth. The peace Christ gives is peace in the midst of trouble (Micah 5:5): "This One will be our peace when the enemy comes into our land." Kings can declare war in a time of peace, but Christ declares peace in a time of war. This peace "surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). It is a foretaste of glory — a cluster of grapes from the true vine that gladdens the heart. So Christ is all in regard to making peace — He makes peace for us and within us.

Sixth, Christ is all in regard to reward. He is the one who crowns us after all our labors and sufferings. He died to lift us up. His being pressed in the winepress was meant to bring us into the wine cellar. He has gone ahead to take possession of heaven on behalf of all believers (Hebrews 6:20): "Where the forerunner has entered on our behalf, even Jesus." Christ has gone to prepare a place for the saints (John 14:2). He makes heaven ready for them, and makes them ready for heaven. So Christ is all in regard to reward (Revelation 22:12): "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me."

If Christ is all, this shows us the vast difference between Christ and created things. The difference is as great as between being and nothingness. Christ is all in all, and the creature is nothing at all.

"Why do you set your eyes on what is not?" (Proverbs 23:5). When Solomon had sifted out the finest quality and distilled the very best of all earthly excellence, his conclusion was: all was vanity (Ecclesiastes 2:11). The Greek word for vanity means empty. All earthly comforts are said to be empty — empty of what we imagine they contain, empty of true satisfaction. This is why they are compared to wind (Hosea 12:1). A person can no more fill his heart with the world than fill his stomach by breathing. The creature is said to be nothing in three senses.

First, it is nothing to a person in spiritual distress. When the spirit is wounded, outward things bring no more relief than a golden crown cures a headache.

Second, the creature is nothing to a person who has heaven in view. When Paul saw that light from heaven, surpassing the brightness of the sun (Acts 26:13), though his eyes were open he saw no one (Acts 9:8). In the same way, the person who has the glory of heaven in view is blind to the world. He sees nothing in it to attract him or make him want to stay.

Third, the creature is nothing to a person who is dying. At the hour of death, a person is at his most serious — most capable of giving a true assessment of things. At that moment, the world is nothing. Its sorrows are real, but its joys turn out to have been imaginary. What an enormous difference, then, between Christ and created things! Christ is all in all, and the creature nothing at all. Yet how many people destroy their souls for nothing?

This also shows where the soul should turn when everything else is lacking — go to Christ, who is all in all. Do you need grace? Go to Christ (Colossians 2:3): "In Him are hidden all the treasures

of wisdom and knowledge." Christ is the great Lord Treasurer. Go to Him and say: "Lord, I am poor in grace, but in You are all my sources of supply." "Lord, I am blind — You have eye salve to heal me. I am defiled — You have water to cleanse me. My heart is hard — You have blood to soften it. I am empty of grace — bring Your fullness to my emptiness." In all our spiritual needs we should come to Christ as Jacob's sons went to their brother Joseph, who opened all the storehouses and gave them grain and provision for the journey (Genesis 41:56; 42:25). The Lord has made Christ our Joseph, in whom all treasures are hidden (Colossians 2:3). Go to Christ. He is all in all. And to encourage you to come to Him: in Him there is not only fullness but generosity — "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." Christ is not only full as a honeycomb, but flowing like one.

If Christ is all, here is a Christian's account of his assets — how rich is the one who has Christ! He has everything that could make him truly and completely happy. When asked where his riches are, the true saint answers: Christ is my riches. A true saint cannot be poor in any ultimate sense. His house may be nearly bare — he may have scarcely a bed to lie on. "To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed and roughly treated and homeless" (1 Corinthians 4:11). Yet at the same time he can triumph with the apostle: "As having nothing, yet possessing all things" (2 Corinthians 6:10). He has Christ, who is all. When a believer can call nothing his own, he can say everything is his. The tabernacle was covered with rough skins on the outside (Exodus 25) — yet within, most of it was gold. So a saint may have poor clothing on the outside, but he is lined with gold: Christ is formed in his heart, and so he is "all glorious within."

If Jesus Christ is all, then a Christian should be content with Christ. What if he lacks other things — is not Christ enough? If a man has the sun, he does not complain that he lacks a candle. Does not the one who has "the unsearchable riches of Christ" have enough? I have read of a godly man who was blind. His friend asked if he was not troubled by the loss of his sight. The friend replied: "Are you troubled because you lack what flies have, when you have what angels have?" So I say to a Christian: why are you distressed over lacking what the condemned have, when you possess what the glorified saints have? Suppose a father refuses to furnish his son's house but settles all his land on him — does the son have any cause to complain? If God withholds a little worldly comfort from you, but settles His inheritance on you and gives you the field where the pearl of great price is hidden — do you have any cause to complain? A Christian who lacks necessities, yet having Christ, has the one thing needful. "You are complete in Him" (Colossians 2:10). Complete in Christ — and not content with Christ? Luther says the sea of God's mercy should swallow up our individual griefs. Surely this ocean of God's love in giving us Christ should drown all our complaints. Let the Christian take up the harp and praise God.

If Christ is all, consider the desperate condition of a person without Christ. He is poor — he is worth nothing (Revelation 3:17): "You are wretched and miserable and poor." The misery of a person without Christ will be seen in seven particulars.

First, he has no justification. What a glorious thing it is when a poor sinner is acquitted of guilt and declared righteous! But this privilege flows from Christ alone. All pardons are sealed in His blood (Acts 13:39): "Through Him everyone who believes is justi-

fied." The one who is outside of Christ is not justified. The guilt of sin clings to him. He must answer to justice in his own person — and the curse stands against the sinner in full force.

The person who lacks Christ lacks the beauty of holiness. Jesus Christ is a living spring of grace (John 1:14): "full of grace and truth." A person without Christ has no grace — not a thread of holiness. A branch must first be grafted into the tree before it can receive sap and life from the root. We must first be grafted into Christ before we can receive from His fullness grace upon grace (John 1:16). A person outside of Christ is red with guilt and black with filth. He is unholy, and if he dies in that condition he cannot see God (Hebrews 12:14).

The person who lacks Christ has no true nobility. It is through Christ that we become kin to God — members of the royal family of heaven. It is through Christ that God is not ashamed to be called our God (Hebrews 11:16). But outside of Christ, a person has no standing before God. Whatever his earthly father may be, the devil is his spiritual father (John 8:44).

The person who lacks Christ lacks freedom (John 8:36): "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." A person outside of Christ is a slave even when he thinks he is sinning most freely.

The person who lacks Christ has no ability for service. He is like Samson after his hair was cut — his strength is gone. He lacks any vital spiritual principle and cannot walk with God. He is like a dead limb in the body — no strength, no movement (John 15:5): "Apart from Me you can do nothing." An organ makes no sound

unless air is blown into it. In the same way, unless Christ breathes into the soul by His Spirit, it can produce no harmony and has no strength for any holy action.

The person who lacks Christ has no consolation. Christ is called the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25). A person without Christ is without comfort. How can such a person have comfort when death approaches? He is in debt with no one to vouch for him. His wounds bleed and he has no physician. He sees the fire of God's wrath coming and has nothing to shield him. He is like a ship caught in a storm. Sickness stirs up a tempest in his body, and sin stirs up a tempest in his conscience, and he has nowhere to take shelter. "Their faces will be like flames" (Isaiah 13:8) — such fear and horror will seize sinners in that day that their faces will go pale. What good are all the comforts of the world to a dying sinner? He looks to his friends, but they cannot help him. Bring him his bags of gold and silver — it only grieves him to leave them behind. Bring him music — what good is a harp and violin to a condemned man? Those who die without Christ, who is the consolation of Israel, are in such anguish that no music in the world can soothe them.

The person who lacks Christ has no salvation (Ephesians 5:23): "He is the Savior of the body." He saves only those who are members of His mystical body. Christ leaped into the sea of His Father's wrath to save His people from drowning. Those who die outside of Christ are cut off from all hope of salvation.

This rebukes those who busy themselves with other things while neglecting Christ. You may gain the whole world, but without Christ you are nothing more than a well-dressed beggar. The physician diagnoses physical diseases in others but ignores the dis-

ease of his own soul — and while he finds remedies for everyone else, he neglects the remedy of Christ's blood for himself. The lawyer spends his days securing other men's legal claims to their land, while he himself has no claim to Christ. The merchant is absorbed in buying and selling but never trades for the pearl of great price. Those who fix their minds so completely on the world that they neglect Christ are doing nothing but spinning spider-webs (Habakkuk 2:13): "Is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples toil only for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing?"

Since Christ is all, place a high value on Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:7): "To you who believe, He is precious." Imagine a jewel that contained the worth of every other jewel combined — would you not treasure it above all else? Christ is that jewel. He is so precious that Paul counted everything as loss in order to gain Christ (Philippians 3:8). Prize Christ above your possessions, above your closest relationships. The person who does not prize Christ above all does not deserve Christ at all. Jesus Christ is a blessing beyond full comprehension — everything God could require for our satisfaction and everything we could desire for our salvation is found in Him. Let Him hold the highest place in your estimation. Bernard said that no writing pleased him unless he found the name of Christ there. The name of Christ is the only music to a Christian's ear, and the blood of Christ is the only true comfort to a Christian's heart.

Since Jesus Christ is all, make sure of Christ. Keep seeking in the means of grace until you have obtained this pearl of great price. In Christ, every good thing is gathered together. Do not let your soul rest until this cluster of myrrh lies between your breasts (Song of Solomon 1:13). In other things we fight for ownership —

this house is mine, these jewels are mine. Why not say: this Christ is mine? There are only two words that can truly satisfy the soul: deity and ownership. Augustine asked: What is God to me if He is not mine? What good was it to the people in Noah's day that an ark existed, if they never got into the ark? To persuade you to obtain Christ, let me show you what an enriching blessing He is.

Christ is the supreme good. Place anything you like on the scale opposite Him — He outweighs it infinitely. Is life sweet? Christ is better! He is the life of the soul (Colossians 3:4), and His loving-kindness is better than life itself (Psalm 63:3). Are relationships sweet? Christ is better still — He is the friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Christ is also a sufficient good. The person who has Christ needs nothing more. If you have the ocean, you have no need of a cistern. If someone possessed a single manuscript containing all human learning — every art and science — he would need no other book. In the same way, the person who has Christ needs look no further. Christ gives both grace and glory (Psalm 84:11) — the one to cleanse us, the other to crown us. As Jacob said when he heard Joseph was alive: "It is enough" (Genesis 45:28). So the person who has Christ may say: it is enough — Jesus is alive.

Christ is a suitable good. In Him all fullness dwells (Colossians 1:19). He is everything the soul could desire. Christ is beauty to adorn, gold to enrich, balm to heal, bread to strengthen, wine to comfort, and salvation to crown. If we are in danger, He is a shield. If we are discouraged, He is a sun. His storehouse more than amply furnishes every need of the soul.

Christ is a sanctifying good. He makes every situation work for our good, sweetens all our comforts, and sanctifies all our hardships.

Christ sweetens all our comforts and turns them into blessings. Health is blessed, wealth is blessed, relationships are blessed. Christ's love is like pouring fresh water on flowers — it makes them give off a richer fragrance. A wicked person cannot enjoy earthly things the way a godly person can. He may possess more, but he enjoys less. The person who has Christ can say: this mercy reaches me through the hand of my Savior — it is a token of His love, a foretaste of glory.

Christ sanctifies all our hardships so that they become medicine for the soul — they work sin out and work grace in. When God tightens the strings of His instrument, He is tuning it to produce better music. Christ ensures that His people lose nothing in the furnace but their impurities.

Christ is a rare blessing — few people truly have Him. The finest things, when they become common, begin to be taken for granted. When silver was as plentiful in Jerusalem as stones (1 Kings 10:27), people thought nothing of it. Christ is a jewel that few possess, which should both increase our appreciation for Him and sharpen our pursuit of Him. There are people to whom God has given the wealth of the entire world, but He has not given them Christ. They have the richness of the earth but not the blessing of heaven. Many people have Christ proclaimed in their hearing, but few have Christ formed in their hearts. Those who are without Christ should find no rest until they have Him.

Christ is a chosen and select good. God shows more love in giving us Christ than in giving us crowns and kingdoms. God may give us other things and still not love us. But in giving Christ, He gives the highest proof of His love. God may give worldly people the blessings of this earth, but in giving Christ to a person He gives the blessings of His throne. Abraham sent away the sons of his concubines with gifts, but he gave everything he had to Isaac (Genesis 25:5). God may send others away with a little gold and silver, but if He gives you Christ, He gives you everything He has. For Christ is all and in all (Psalm 145:16): "You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing." In giving the world, God opens His hand. But in giving Christ, He opens His heart. Christ is the crowning blessing.

Christ is such a good that without Him nothing else is truly good. Without Christ, health is not a blessing — it becomes fuel for sinful desires. Wealth is not a blessing — it becomes a golden trap. Even the means of grace are not truly good without Christ. Though good in themselves, they profit nothing without Him. They are like breasts with no milk, or bottles with no wine. Without Christ, the means of grace will not only be a dead letter but will become a means of greater condemnation — for lack of Christ, millions go to hell loaded down with religious observances.

Christ is an enduring good. Other things are like a lamp that uses itself up as it burns. "The heavens will wear out like a garment" (Psalm 102:26). But Jesus Christ is permanent. With Him are durable riches (Proverbs 8:18) that last as long as eternity itself.

Christ is a giving and generous good. He is full not merely as a vessel that holds water but as a spring that pours it out. And He is willing to give Himself to us. He calls: "Come to Me, all who are weary." He eagerly desires that the union between us and Him be completed. If only we were as willing as Christ is! Given all this variety of excellence in Jesus Christ, we should be filled with an eager desire to have a share in Him.

But how can I obtain a part in Christ?

First, see your need of Christ — recognize that you are completely undone without Him. The furnace of hell is being prepared for sinners. What will you do without Christ? Only the Lord Jesus can stand as a shield to keep the fire of God's wrath from consuming you. Is there not the greatest need imaginable for Christ? Though Christ is offered to sinners, He will not throw Himself away on those who see no need of Him. See yourself as wounded, and then Christ — that good Samaritan — will pour wine and oil into your wounds. "He who does not believe has been judged already" (John 3:18). The person who dies in his sin without laying hold of Christ by faith is as certainly condemned as if the sentence had already been carried out.

Second, be persistent in seeking Christ — cry out: Lord, give me Christ or I die. As Achsah said to her father Caleb: "You have given me land in the Negev; give me also springs of water" (Joshua 15:19). In the same way, a poor soul should say: Lord, You have given me an estate in this world, but this land cannot quench my thirst — give me also springs of water. Give me those living springs that flow from my Savior's blood. Lord, I thirst after Jesus Christ. Nothing but Christ will satisfy me. Without Him I am dead, I am lost. When the blind man cried out persistently, Jesus stopped and

healed him (Luke 18:40). Christ cannot turn away a praying soul. Just as a tender mother opens her arms when her child cries for her, so when a humble, thirsty sinner cries out persistently to heaven, God will open the fountain of free grace and say: Here — take My Christ. Be satisfied with Him. Let Him be to you all in all, both food and medicine.

Third, be willing to receive Christ as He is offered — as both Prince and Savior (Acts 5:31). Do not try to bargain with Christ. Some want Christ and their sins as well. If Christ is all, are you unwilling to give up anything for this all? Christ asks you to give up nothing except what would damn you if you kept it — namely your sins. Turn from this poison in repentance, and Christ will pour in the wine of His blood to restore your heart.

Some make a partial offer to Christ — they will give up some sins but hold one back in reserve. If you leave even one sin in your heart, it will become an egg for Satan to hatch. If a person gives up many sins but clings to love for one sin, he has an adulterous heart, and Christ will not enter into covenant with him. Give up everything for the One who is everything — give up your sinful desires, and your very life if Christ calls for it.

This also calls us not only to obtain Christ but to labor to know that we have Christ (1 John 2:3): "By this we know that we have come to know Him." Some theologians call this the sensible awareness of faith. Concerning this knowledge that Christ is ours — which is the same as assurance — I will set out four conclusions.

First, this knowledge is attainable — it can be obtained (1 John 5:13): "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal

life." The apostle wrote to these believers so that they could know they were believers and could be assured that Christ was theirs. The Roman Catholics deny this certainty of knowledge. One of their canons actually declares: let anyone who holds to assurance be condemned. But assurance can be obtained, as the following arguments demonstrate.

Why else would God command us to make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10), and to test ourselves whether we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5), if assurance were impossible? The Greek word for testing means to pierce through a piece of metal to see whether it is gold all the way through. A Christian can similarly pierce his heart through self-examination to see whether Christ has been formed within him.

What purpose do all the scriptural signs of being in Christ serve if a person cannot actually come to know whether he has an interest in Christ? "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers" (1 John 3:14). "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit" (1 John 4:13). These signs would be pointless if assurance were beyond reach.

There are duties commanded in Scripture that would be utterly impossible if a person cannot know whether he has an interest in Christ. We are commanded to rejoice in God (Philippians 4:4) and to rejoice even in suffering (1 Peter 4:13). How can someone rejoice in suffering if he has no way of knowing whether Christ belongs to him or not?

Why would Christ promise to send the Comforter (John 14:16) — whose very work is to bring the heart to assurance — if assurance that Christ is ours were unattainable? Scripture speaks of the seal of the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13) and the Spirit as a deposit and firstfruits (2 Corinthians 1:22; Romans 8:23). The promise of the Comforter would be empty, and the Spirit's witness and deposit would be illusions, if the assurance of union with Christ were not genuinely possible.

Some of the saints have arrived at this certainty, which proves it can be obtained. Job knew that his Redeemer lives (Job 19:25). Paul had this assurance (2 Timothy 1:12; Galatians 2:20). The apostle speaks of it as something common to believers (Romans 8:35): "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" He does not say who shall separate me, but who shall separate us — so all of this demonstrates that a believer can come to know his interest in Christ.

Caution one: this does not mean the saints always have the same level of certainty, or that their assurance is so complete that it leaves no room for doubt or struggle. Their comforts ebb and flow just as their graces do. At one point David says God's loving-kindness was before his eyes (Psalm 26:3); at another he cries out: "Where is Your loving-kindness?" (Psalm 89:49). At one point Paul raises the banner of victory and sings his triumphant song (Romans 8:37): "We are more than conquerors." At another point his confidence seems to crumble — he is like a man floundering in the middle of the sea, crying out: "Wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7:24). A saint in this life is like a ship at anchor — safe,

yet rocked by the waves. God permits these doubts in His children at times so that they will long all the more for heaven, where they will have an unceasing flood-tide of joy.

Caution two: this does not mean all believers have the same degree of assurance.

Assurance is more properly the fruit of faith than faith itself. Just as the root of a rose may be alive even when the flower is not visible, faith may be alive in the heart even when the flower of assurance has not yet appeared. Yet this much is certain: God's Spirit works so much in the heart of every true believer that he can build his hope upon it. For example: a deep prizing of Christ, a resting in Christ, a delight in His image, a love for His word. Even the weakest believer has enough to show that he would not trade it for the whole world.

Assurance is difficult to obtain — it is a rare jewel and hard to come by. Not many Christians possess it.

God sometimes withholds assurance from His people so that they will walk humbly. Because of our fallen nature, we tend to abuse the richest mercies — moths breed in the finest cloth, and worms in the sweetest fruit. Pride is quick to breed in the sweet fruit of assurance. It is hard for Christians to lack assurance and be content, and to have it and remain humble.

Satan does everything he can to block our assurance. He is called the red dragon (Revelation 12:3) — and how he stirs up the waters of a Christian's peace! If the devil cannot keep a believer out of heaven, he will do everything he can to keep heaven out of the believer's experience on earth. He torments believers with fears and anxieties. Even if he cannot erase a Christian's evidence

of salvation, he sometimes casts such a fog before the believer's eyes that he cannot read that evidence. The devil resents God receiving any glory and the soul receiving any comfort.

Our lack of assurance is most often our own fault. We walk carelessly, neglect our spiritual watch, let go of the promises, and give in to temptation. No wonder we then walk in darkness and cannot tell whether Christ is ours or not. Our inconsistent walk grieves the Spirit, whose work it is to seal assurance within us. If we quench the graces of the Spirit, it is no surprise when God withholds the comforts of the Spirit.

Assurance is deeply sweet. This wine of paradise cheers the heart. Without this knowledge that Christ is ours, we often hang our harps on the willows and sit weeping (Psalm 137:1-2). A man may have a rich gold mine in his field, but if he does not know it is there, he gains no comfort from it. Hagar had a well of water right beside her, but because her eyes were kept from seeing it, she sat down and wept. It is the knowledge of our share in Christ that produces comfort. "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47) — not a Savior, but my Savior. The person who knows Christ is his has received a kiss from Christ's lips and dies in triumph. Assurance brings a person into heaven before his time.

Assurance is very practical — it will drive us to active service for Christ.

Assurance produces active obedience. Contrary to what the Roman Catholics claim, assurance does not breed complacency — it breeds energy. It makes us soar in holy duties like eagles on the wing. Faith makes us alive; assurance makes us lively. If we know that Christ is ours, we will never feel we have loved Him enough or

served Him enough. "The love of Christ compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14). Assurance is like wings to a bird, like oil to a lamp, like weights to a clock — it sets all the gears of obedience in motion. Assurance sharpens the graces; it stirs up hope, love, and zeal. Faith makes a Christian walk; assurance makes him run. "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). Assurance fills the soul with such joy that strength for duty flows from it.

Assurance also produces passive obedience (Romans 5:3-5): "We also rejoice in our tribulations, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts." The person who has Christ's love poured into his heart will be willing to pour out his blood for Christ. The person who knows Christ is his will step out to meet Him, as Peter stepped out onto the water. He comforts himself with this: though he may lose everything for Christ, he will find everything in Christ. The person assured that Christ is his will risk losing all for Him. He knows that while he may be a loser for Christ, he cannot be a loser by Christ — for Christ is all and in all. No wonder Paul was willing to be bound and to die for Christ (Acts 21:13) when he knew that Christ loved him and gave Himself for him (Galatians 2:20).

But how can I obtain this jewel of assurance?

First, make the means of grace a regular part of your life. When the bride sought Christ diligently, she found Him joyfully (Song of Solomon 3:4). The ordinances are the lattice through which Christ looks out and gives the soul a glimpse of His face. Just as Christ made Himself known to His disciples in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:35), so through the use of the holy ordinances Christ makes a glorious disclosure of Himself to the soul. Christ's parents

found Him in the temple (Luke 2:46). Those who want to find Christ and experience the kiss of His lips will surely meet Him there.

Second, keep your conscience pure. You would not pour wine into a dirty glass — you pour it into a clean one. In the same way, when the soul has been cleansed from the love of every sin, God will pour in the sweet wine of assurance. "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience" (Hebrews 10:22). Guilt clips the wings of joy. The person who knows he is hiding some secret sin cannot draw near to God in full assurance. Assurance is a flower that grows only in a pure heart. Before David prays for joy, he first prays for a clean heart (Psalm 51:10): "Create in me a clean heart, O God."

Third, be vigorous in exercising faith. The more a child obeys, the sooner he receives his father's smile. If your faith is near death (Revelation 3:2) — like armor gathering dust or a habit that has gone dormant in the soul — do not expect assurance. God does not speak peace to you when you are spiritually asleep. It is lively faith that blossoms into assurance. Abraham had a vigorous, active faith (Romans 4:18): "In hope against hope he believed." That is, against the hope offered by his senses, he believed in the hope held out in the promise. How graciously God revealed Himself to Abraham — calling him His friend and taking him into His confidence (Genesis 18:17): "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" Do you want Christ to reveal His love to you? Keep faith active. This is the bird that soars high and plucks a cluster of grapes from the true vine.

Since Christ is all, make Him all to you.

Make Christ all in your understanding — be eager to know nothing but Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2): "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Augustine said of Cicero: he admired his eloquence, but he could not take full delight in reading him because he could not find the name of Christ there. What good is all other knowledge to a person at the hour of death who is ignorant of Christ? What is it to have medical knowledge — to be able to discuss the causes and symptoms of disease — and at the same time to be ignorant of the healing found under Christ's wings? What is it to know astronomy — to discuss the stars and planets — and yet be ignorant of Christ, that bright morning star who leads to heaven? What is it to be skilled in business and ignorant of the one commodity that both enriches and crowns? What is it to be well versed in music and ignorant of Christ, whose blood makes peace in heaven and music in the conscience? Make Christ all — be willing to know nothing but Christ. Let the knowledge of Jesus Christ hold first place, as the sun holds first place among the lesser planets.

This is the knowledge that crowns all other knowledge (Proverbs 4:18): "The prudent are crowned with knowledge."

We cannot truly know ourselves unless we know Christ. He is the one who shines light into our own hearts and reveals the stains of our souls, causing us to see ourselves clearly and be humbled. Christ shows us our own emptiness and need — and until we see our emptiness, we are not ready to be filled with the golden oil of God's mercy.

We cannot know God except through Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). Outside of Christ, God is terrifying — He is a consuming fire. It is through Christ that we come to know God as a friend.

Treasure up the knowledge of Christ. He is the golden ladder by which we ascend to heaven. To be ignorant of Christ is like a man who has been poisoned, while in the garden nearby there is an herb that could cure him — but he does not know it exists.

Make Christ all in your affections.

Desire nothing but Christ — He is the sum of all good things. "You are complete in Him" (Colossians 2:10). Christ is the Christian's fulfillment. What should the soul desire less? What could it desire more? "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Psalm 73:25). David had his crown and his throne to take pleasure in, yet it was the presence of Christ he chiefly thirsted after. Without Christ, all his other comforts were not just empty but bitter.

Love nothing but Christ. Love is the finest affection, the purest stream of the soul, the richest gift a person has to give. Since Christ is all, love Him above all. Let your rivers flow into this golden sea. In Christ are "unsearchable riches" (Ephesians 3:8). The angels have lived in heaven for ages, and to this day they do not fully know how rich Christ is. Neither man nor angel can set a full price on the pearl of great price. Should not Jesus Christ lie nearest our hearts? Should He not have the best of our love?

If you love other things, when they perish your love is lost. But Christ lives forever to return your love.

You can love other things in excess, but you cannot love Christ in excess. Mary loved much (Luke 7:47), but not too much. If Christ cannot be prized enough, He cannot be loved too much. Even the angels in heaven cannot love Christ to the full measure He deserves.

When you love other things, you love something less than yourself — a fine house, a pleasant garden — these things are below you. If you want to give your deepest love to anything, give it to something better than yourself, and that is Jesus Christ. He who is all — let Him have all. Give your love to the one who desires it most and deserves it best.

Make Christ all in how you use your abilities — do everything in His strength (Ephesians 6:10): "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might." When you face a temptation to resist or a sinful habit to put to death, do not go forward in your own strength but in the strength of Christ. Some go to their duties relying on their own gifts, and go against sin relying on their own resolutions — and they come back defeated. Do as David when he faced Goliath: "I come to you in the name of the Lord." Say the same to whatever sinful desire towers over you: I come against you in the name of Christ. We conquer when the Lion of the tribe of Judah marches before us. Christ is called a horn of salvation (Luke 1:69). The strength of an animal lies in its horn, and so the strength of a believer lies in this horn of salvation. A bird might as well try to fly without wings as we can accomplish anything effective without Christ (1 Samuel 2:9): "For not by strength shall a man prevail."

Make Christ all in your aims — do everything for His glory (1 Peter 4:11). Let Christ be the center to which every line of your actions runs. The hypocrite claims to act for Christ but is really advancing his own interests (Hosea 10:1) — like a man who pretends to court a woman on behalf of his friend but is actually a suitor for himself. How many use the name of Christ as a stepping stone to climb into positions of honor and advancement? Make Christ all in your aims and intentions. In every action ask yourself: will this

honor Christ? Will this bring any gain to His kingdom? How blessed it would be if it could be said of us, as the angel said to the two Marys (Matthew 28:5): "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified." A person who does not take a right aim can never hit the target. The person who does not aim at God's glory can never reach the goal of his own salvation.

Make Christ all in your trust — rely on no one but Christ for salvation. The Roman church makes Christ something but not everything. They trust partly to Christ and partly to their own merits. They pray to Christ and to angels — to Christ as Mediator of Redemption and to angels as mediators of intercession. They invoke the Virgin Mary for mercy, mixing her intercession with Christ's blood. But what is given to others through misguided devotion is taken from Christ by sacrilege. Eagle feathers will not blend with feathers from other birds. Christ will not share His glory by having His blood mixed with the merits of saints or the prayers of angels. Christ will be all in all, or nothing at all.

Is there not a natural trace of this same error in our own hearts? We naturally want to build our hope of salvation on the foundation of our own righteousness. As Luther said: every person is born with a pope in his heart. How easily we idolize our duties and our graces, drawing so much confidence from the stream that we forget the spring! Make Christ all in regard to trust. Let Him be your city of refuge to flee to, your ark to shelter in. Luther said: even if I could keep the whole moral law perfectly, I would not trust in it for justification — I would bow to Christ's merits alone.

Make Christ all in your joy (Galatians 6:14): "May it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47). The Virgin

Mary did not rejoice so much that she was Christ's mother as that Christ was her Savior. How filled with joy was Simeon when he took Christ in his arms! (Luke 2:29) How much more joyful should the person be who has taken Christ in the arms of faith! When the wise men saw the star, "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Matthew 2:10). Christian, have you seen the Lord Jesus? Has this morning star shined into your heart? Then rejoice and be filled with great joy. Will others rejoice in the world, while you do not rejoice in Christ? God has given the men of this world a crutch to lean on. He has given you a Christ to lean on. It reflects poorly on Christ when His saints walk in sadness and discouragement. Is not Christ yours — what more could you want?

But someone says: I am poor in this world, and that takes the joy out of me and makes my life heavy going.

But do you not have Christ? And is not Christ all (Psalm 16:5-6): "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cup; the lines have fallen to me in pleasant places"? The person united to Christ by faith has a claim to all of Christ's riches. A beggar who marries a prince has a right and title to all of the prince's wealth.

But if I truly knew that Christ was mine, then I could rejoice — the question is, how can I know that?

Is your soul filled with longing and thirsting after Christ? Do you desire the water from Christ's side to cleanse you, as well as the blood from His side to save you? These sighs and longings are stirred up by the Spirit of God. By the beating of this pulse, you can judge the life of faith within you. A wicked person has none of

these longings after Christ (Job 21:14): "They say to God, 'Depart from us.'" If your heart is drawing toward Christ, it is because the Spirit — like a divine magnet — has been drawing it.

Have you surrendered yourself fully to Christ in complete submission? Are you His not only by upbringing but by wholehearted consecration? This is a good sign that Christ is yours (Psalm 27:8): "When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, Lord, I shall seek.'"

Be thankful for Christ. God has done more for you in giving you Christ than if He had seated you among the princes of the earth (Psalm 113:8). He has done more for you than if He had made you an angel — for through your union with Christ, you are richer than the angels. In giving you Christ, God has given you more than if He had given you the whole world. God can create more worlds, but He has only one Son. As Naomi said to her daughters-in-law: "Do I have any more sons in my womb?" (Ruth 1:11) God cannot give a greater gift than Christ — for in giving Christ, He gives Himself to us. All of this calls loudly for thankfulness.

Here is a wellspring of comfort for everyone who has Christ: Christ is all, and it is good to drink at this fountain. When a Christian sees a deficiency in himself, he can look to his Savior and find there an all-sufficiency. "Happy is the people whose God is the Lord" (Psalm 144:15). A servant who has his master's full purse at his disposal will lack nothing. The person who has Christ will lack nothing, for Christ is all and in all. What does it matter if the fig tree does not blossom, if you have Christ — the tree of life bearing every kind of fruit? In the hour of death a believer may rejoice — for when he leaves everything behind, he enters into the posses-

sion of everything. As Ambrose said: I do not fear death because I have a good Lord. So any godly person may say: I do not fear death because I have a Christ to go to. Death will only carry me to that river of divine pleasure that flows at His right hand forever. Therefore, "comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

THE PRECIOUSNESS OF THE SOUL



Matthew 16:26 — "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Every person carries a treasure within — a divine soul. Our Savior places a value on it here. He sets the soul on the scale against the whole world, and the soul weighs more. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"

The world is a magnificent structure, full of beauty and excellence — like a finely crafted tapestry woven with many colors. It is a bright mirror in which much of the wisdom and majesty of God is reflected. But as glorious as this world is, every person carries within him something more glorious — a precious soul. The soul is a great thing. The entire world could not afford to pay half the price of a soul. Gaining the world at the cost of a soul will ruin the buyer, and losing the soul will undo the one who sells it. If we save our souls while losing the world, that is a worthwhile loss. If we lose our souls while gaining the world, our very gains will destroy us. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

The text has five parts.

First, a hypothetical purchase: if a man shall gain. Christ does not say he will gain — He poses a scenario. It is only a supposition.

Second, the purchase itself — the world.

Third, the scope of the purchase — the whole world, with all its wealth and benefits.

Fourth, the cost of this purchase — he forfeits his soul. Not that his soul is destroyed — that would almost be a mercy — but he loses the very purpose for which he was created. He misses glory. The loss of the soul is made worse by two things.

First, the intimacy of the loss — his own soul, that which is closest to him, that which is most essentially himself. The soul is the most noble part of a person — it is the innermost self. He forfeits his own soul.

Second, the finality of the loss: what will a man give in exchange for his soul? The words contain an understatement — less is said than is meant. What will he give? The implication is: he has nothing to give. And even if he had something to give, nothing would be accepted. The soul cannot be ransomed after the fact — no bail will be taken for it. "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Fifth, Christ's verdict on this transaction: "For what will it profit a man?" Christ is saying: he will have made a terrible bargain and will regret it in the end. It is the fool's purchase: "For what will it profit a man?"

Observe: the soul of a person is a jewel more precious than the whole world. All souls share the same worth — the soul of a prince and the soul of a peasant are equal. Every soul is worth more than

a world. Two things must be demonstrated to establish this doctrine.

First, that the soul is very precious.

Second, that it is more precious than a world.

That the soul is very precious. What Job says of wisdom I apply fittingly to the soul: "Man does not know its worth; it cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, nor in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for articles of fine gold" (Job 28:13-17). The soul is the glory of creation. It may be described this way: the soul is a beam from God — a spark of heavenly brightness, as Damascene calls it; a mirror of the Trinity, as Plato puts it. Within the soul is an image and likeness of God — what the scholastic theologians call an analogy of resemblance. If David marveled at the remarkable construction of his own body (Psalm 139:13-15) — "I am fearfully and wonderfully made; I was intricately woven in the depths of the earth" — if the case is so beautifully crafted, what must the jewel inside be? How richly and gloriously is the soul fashioned — divinely inlaid and adorned! The body is only the sheath (Daniel 7:15): "I was distressed in my spirit" — in the Aramaic, "in the midst of my sheath." Even the most beautiful body is only like a velvet sheath; the soul is the blade forged from extraordinary metal. The soul is a sparkling diamond set in a ring of clay. The soul is a vessel of honor — God Himself is served in this vessel. The soul is the bird of paradise that soars upward. It can be compared to the wings of the cherubim — with a swift, winged ability to fly toward heaven. The soul is capable of fellowship with God and angels. The soul is God's house, which He has made for Himself to dwell in (Hebrews 3:6). The understanding, will, and affections are the three levels of this

house. What a tragedy that this magnificent dwelling should be occupied by the devil as its tenant! The preciousness of the soul is seen in two particulars.

The soul has an intrinsic worth and an estimated worth.

The soul has an intrinsic worth, which is seen in two things.

First, its spirituality: the soul is a spiritual substance. The ancient thinkers said our souls are formed in the same mold as the heavenly spirits. The soul is spiritual in three ways: in its essence, its object, and its operation.

In its essence. In its object. In its operation.

The soul is spiritual in its essence. God breathed it into man (Genesis 2:7) — it is a spark ignited by the breath of God. The soul may be compared to the pure spirits distilled from wine, while the body is like the dregs. The spirits are the more pure and refined part — and so it is with the soul. The body is the coarser element; the soul is the more refined and elevated part of a person. Let me be clear: when I say the soul is spiritual and a beam from God, I do not mean it is made of the same substance as God. Servetus, Osiander, and others wrongly believed that when God breathed into man the breath of life, He was conveying His own divine spirit and substance into man — an opinion that is both absurd and sinful. For if the soul were part of the Divine Essence, then God's Essence would be subject not only to change and suffering but, far worse, to sin — which is blasphemy to even suggest. So when we say the soul is spiritual, the meaning is this: God has endowed it with many noble qualities. He has made it a mirror of beauty and stamped upon it a remarkable excellence. Just as sunlight shining on crystal conveys its brightness — not its own being.

The soul is spiritual in its object — it contemplates God and heaven. God is the sphere and center where the soul settles. If you could lift a stone into the highest region of the sky, however many pieces it broke into, it would still fall back to its center. God is the destination toward which the soul moves, as to its rest (Psalm 116:7): "Return to your rest, O my soul." He is the ark to which this dove flies. Nothing but God can fill a soul born for heaven. If the earth were turned into a globe of gold, it still could not satisfy the heart — it would keep crying, "Give, give." Because the soul is spiritual, God alone can fully satisfy it.

The soul is spiritual in its operation. Being immaterial, it does not depend on the body to function. The senses of sight, hearing, and the rest of the body's functions cease and die with the body, because they are part of the body and depend on it. But the soul, as Aristotle observes, has a nature distinct from the body. It moves and acts on its own even when the body is dead, and does not depend on or cease to exist with the body. Thales Milesius, an ancient philosopher, defined the soul as self-moving — it has an internal principle of life and motion even when separated from the body. And so we have seen the soul's spirituality.

The preciousness of the soul also appears in its immortality. Some claim the soul is mortal. One might almost say it would be better for those who do not live like human beings if they could die like animals. But as Julius Scaliger rightly observes, it is impossible for anything of a spiritual, simple nature to be subject to death and decay. The souls of believers are with Christ after death (Philippians 1:23). Oecolampadius said to his friend who came to visit him on his deathbed: "Good news — I shall shortly be with Christ my Lord." And the devoted soul will be with the Lord for-

ever (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Even the pagans had glimpses of the soul's immortality. Cicero says the swan was dedicated to Apollo because it sings sweetly before its death. By this symbol, they expressed the joy of virtuous people as they approached death, imagining the delights they would enjoy in the life to come. And it was a Roman custom, when great men died, to release an eagle into the air, signifying that the soul is immortal and does not die with the body.

The soul's immortality can be proved by this argument: that which cannot be killed cannot die. But the soul cannot be killed. Christ Himself proves this: "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul" (Luke 12:4). Therefore the soul, being incapable of being killed, is not subject to death. The essence of the soul is metaphysical — it has a beginning but no end. It is eternal going forward. The soul does not grow old. It lives forever — which cannot be said of any earthly glory. Worldly things are as full of change as they are of motion, and like Jonah's plant, they have a worm eating at the root.

The soul also has an estimated worth.

Jesus Christ has placed a high value on the soul. He made it and He bought it — so He knows its price better than anyone. He sold Himself to purchase the soul. Zechariah 11:12: "They weighed out thirty shekels of silver as My price." He was willing not only to be sold but to die. This makes the price of the soul even clearer — it cost the blood of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 1:19): "You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold, but with precious blood — the blood of Christ." God had to die so that the soul might live. The heir of heaven was, so to speak, pledged and handed over as a ransom for the soul of man. What more could

Christ give than Himself? What within Himself was more precious than His blood? What a precious soul — bearing the image of God to give it beauty, and redeemed by the blood of God! Christ was the priest, His divine nature the altar, and His blood the sacrifice offered as atonement for our souls. Reckon what a single drop of Christ's blood is worth, and then tell me what a soul is worth.

Even Satan values souls — he knows what they are worth. He says what the king of Sodom said to Abraham: "Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself." So Satan says: give me the persons. He does not trouble himself to take your wealth — it is your soul he is after. What are all his crafty strategies and subtle traps for, if not to catch souls? Why does this lion roar if not for his prey? He is envious of the soul's happiness. He lays the whole train of temptation to blow up the entire fortress of the soul. Why does he craft such carefully matched lures? He dangles a crown before the ambitious, a golden apple before the greedy, and beauty before the sensual. The devil is fishing for the precious soul. If Satan cannot drag souls back to hell with him, it is the only heaven he can hope for — to reach out his paw and pull others in with him.

Having established the soul's preciousness, the next point is that the soul is more precious than a whole world. The world is made of cruder material. The soul is heaven-born — of finer quality and nobler origin. The world is a great book in which we read the majesty and wisdom of its Maker. But the soul is the image of God (Genesis 1). The soul is a carefully considered work. When God made the world it was by a simple word — let it be, and it was done. But when He made the soul, all three persons of the Trinity deliberated together (Genesis 1:26): "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." The soul is a mirror in which rays

of divine glory shine. Since the fall, the soul may be compared to the moon in its new phase — largely darkened by sin. But when it is sanctified by the Spirit and brought to heaven, it will shine like the full moon, displaying its perfect glory.

Since the soul is so precious, consider what kind of worship God expects and accepts — namely, worship that comes from the most noble part of a person, the soul itself. Psalm 25:1: "To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul." David did not only lift up his voice — he lifted up his soul. While God does want the eye and the knee — the service of the body — He complains of those who draw near to Him with their lips while their hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). The soul is the jewel. David did not only tune his lute and harp — he tuned his soul to praise God. Psalm 103:1: "Bless the Lord, O my soul" — his affections joining together in worship made up the song. The soul is at once the altar, the fire, and the incense. It is the altar on which we offer our prayers, the fire that ignites them, and the incense that perfumes them. God's eye is chiefly on the soul. He will not receive from any other dish — this is the food He prizes. He who is best deserves to be served with the best. When we give God the soul in worship, we give Him the finest. A soul set ablaze in service is the spiced wine and the juice of the pomegranate which the bride makes her beloved drink (Song of Solomon 8:2). Without the worship of the soul, all our religion is mere physical exercise (1 Timothy 4:8), which profits nothing. Without the soul, we offer God only a corpse. What are all the fasts, penances, and pilgrimages of Roman Catholics but a more elaborate way of going to hell? What are the formal prayers of the religious hyp-

ocrite — which grow cold even as they leave his lips — but dead devotion? That is not sacrifice but sacrilege — he robs God of what God has a right to: the soul.

Since the soul is so precious, how precious should we consider the means of grace and the ministers of the Gospel to be?

The means of grace are the golden ladder by which the soul climbs toward heaven — they are channels carrying the water of life. Those who oppose the means of grace are opposing the means of their own salvation.

How precious should ministers be — men whose very calling is to save souls? Their feet should be considered beautiful (Romans 10:15).

Their labors deserve to be honored. They labor before God and on behalf of your soul. All their effort, their tears, their prayers are for you. They plead for your soul, and many spend their lives in the cause.

The freedom of faithful ministers should be cherished. Constantine greatly honored the ministry. If you see any in this sacred calling who are like a medicine that burns in the mouth but does nothing in the body — if you see ministers who are either lazy or corrupt, who do not rightly teach the Word and do not live uprightly — censure them without hesitation. Under the law, the lips of a person with skin disease were to be covered. A minister who is by office an angel but by his life a leper deserves to be silenced. A good preacher who lives badly is like a physician with the plague — his prescriptions may be sound, but his plague infects the patient. If you find a Hophni and Phinehas among the sons of Levi, whose scandalous conduct makes people despise the offering of God, you

will be doing what God would otherwise have to do Himself by removing them. But be sure to distinguish between the precious and the worthless. While draining bad blood, be careful to preserve the heart's blood. While purging out what is harmful, do not destroy what is vital. While trimming the charred wicks, do not put out the lights of God's sanctuary. It is the work of a Julian to suppress the faithful ministry and prop up false religion. The Romans sacked and leveled the city of Corinth because an insult was offered to their ambassador. God will avenge the wrongs done to His ministers (Psalm 105:15). If souls are of infinite value, how precious should be the liberty of those whose entire purpose is to save souls! (1 Timothy 4:16; Jude 23)

Since the soul is so precious, be careful not to abuse your soul. Socrates urged young men to look at their faces in a mirror, and if they were handsome, to take care to do nothing unworthy of their appearance. Christians, God has given you souls that shine with divine beauty. Do nothing unworthy of these souls — do not abuse them. There are four kinds of people who abuse their souls.

Those who degrade their souls.

Those who place the world above the soul — who pant after the dust of the earth (Amos 2:7). This is like a man whose house is on fire who rushes to save the furniture while his child burns inside.

Those who make the soul a servant to the body. The body is the lesser, brutish part; the soul is the noble, angelic part. The soul is the rightful ruler, adorned with the jewels of knowledge and wielding the scepter of reason and will. What a tragedy that this excellent soul should be made a servant — forced to grind at the mill — while the body sits enthroned! Solomon notes an evil he observed

(Ecclesiastes 10:7): "I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking on foot like slaves." Is it not an evil to see the body riding in triumph while the soul — that royal, heaven-born thing — trudges along on foot like a servant?

Those who abuse and sell their souls.

The greedy person sells his soul for money. As it is said of the corrupt lawyer that he has a tongue that can be bought for a fee, so the covetous man has a soul for sale. Achan sold his soul for a wedge of gold. Judas sold his soul for silver — and what a terrible bargain he made! For thirty pieces of silver he sold Christ, who was worth more than heaven, and his own soul, which was worth more than the whole world. How many have damned their souls for the love of money (1 Timothy 6:9-10)! It has been observed that eagle quills mixed with hen feathers will in time destroy them. The world is the same way with the soul. If you allow earthly things to mix with your soul and let them lie too close to you, they will in time consume and ruin it.

The ambitious person sells his soul for honor. Alexander the Sixth sold his soul to the devil for the papacy. And what is human honor but an empty thing? It is a torch lit by people's applause — put out by the slightest breath of criticism. It is a miserable condition to depend on the opinion of others for your sense of worth. How many souls have been swept into hell by the winds of popular applause?

The pleasure-seeking person sells his soul for pleasure. Heliogabalus drowned himself in sweet water. In the same way, many drown their souls in the sweet, perfumed waters of pleasure.

Plato calls pleasure the bait that catches souls — they are caught like fish on a hook. Pleasure is a silken noose, a flattering destroyer. It kills with its embrace.

Those who abuse their souls by poisoning them with false doctrine. Error is a sweet poison. Ignatius calls it the invention of the devil. A person can damn his soul through false belief just as surely as through immoral living, and may go to hell for holding a corrupt opinion just as readily as for living a corrupt life.

Those who abuse their souls by starving them — those who say they are beyond the need for the means of grace. But we will not be beyond the means of grace until we are beyond sin. The apostle says that in the Lord's Supper we are to remember the Lord's death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:26) — that is, until Christ comes to judge the world. How then can anyone skip the sacraments without showing contempt for Christ Himself? If Paul and the apostles — those giants of grace — needed the Lord's Supper to strengthen and confirm them, how much more do we need these holy ordinances, when our faith is still in its infancy? Satan approves of these fasting days — he would have people fast from the means of grace. If the body is kept from food long enough, it cannot survive.

Since the soul is so precious, take care that you do not lose it. Consider what such a loss means, as appears in two ways.

It is a foolish loss to lose the soul (Luke 12:20): "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you." It is foolish in three respects.

It is foolish because there is a real possibility of saving the soul. We have time to work in, we have light to work by, and the Spirit is offering help. The soul is like a ship loaded with treasure. The Spirit is the wind ready to blow. If we would only lift anchor from sin, we could sail into the harbor of eternal happiness.

It is foolish because we lose the soul for things of no real value. Worldly things are infinitely beneath the soul. The world is an enchantment — these things glitter in our eyes. But at death we will say we set our eyes on what was not truly there. To lose the soul for such poor things is as foolish as throwing away a diamond to hit a pear tree — and losing the diamond.

It is foolish because a person loses his own soul by his own choice. Is it not the height of folly to poison yourself? A sinner has his own hands stained with his soul's blood (Hosea 13:9): "Your destruction is from yourself." "They lie in wait for their own blood" (Proverbs 1:18). The foolish sinner feeds the very desires that are killing his soul. The tree breeds the worm, and the worm eats the tree. Would it not be folly for a garrison to open its gates to the very enemy besieging it? The sinner throws open his gates to the sinful desires that are making war against his soul (1 Peter 2:11). This is a foolish loss.

It is also a fatal loss to lose the soul.

It is a loss without equal, because in losing the soul so many other things are lost along with it. When a merchant loses his ship, he loses everything that was aboard — his money, his valuables, his jewels, his goods. In the same way, the person who loses his soul loses Christ, loses the Comforter, loses the fellowship of angels, and loses heaven.

It is an irreversible loss. Other losses can be recovered. If a person loses his health, he may regain it. If he loses his wealth, he may earn it back. But if he loses his soul, that loss can never be repaired. Will there be other Saviors to die for the soul? As Naomi said to her daughters-in-law: "Do I have any more sons in my womb?" (Ruth 1:11) Will God send His Son into the world again? No — when Christ comes next, it will not be to save the soul but to judge it. Christian, remember: you have only one soul, and if it is lost, everything is lost. God, as Chrysostom says, has given you two eyes — if you lose one, you still have the other. But you have only one soul. If that perishes, you are completely undone. The merchant who stakes everything on a single ship — if that ship goes down, he is ruined.

The loss of the soul is an eternal loss. Once lost, the soul is lost forever. The person who loses his soul may repeat the words of that wicked theologian in Paris who cried out on his deathbed: "Have pity on my burial — nothing can help me now. Woe to the wretch! Why did my parents bring me into the world? I go away condemned to eternal fire." The sinner and the furnace will never be separated (Isaiah 33:14). Just as the sinner's heart will never be emptied of sin, God's cup of wrath will never be emptied. It is an eternal loss.

Do everything you can to secure the most important thing — the salvation of your precious soul. In times of danger, people call in their debts and work to protect what they own. All who are still in their natural, unregenerate state — your souls are mortgaged. If your property were mortgaged, you would do everything possible to redeem it. Your soul is mortgaged. Sin has mortgaged it — sin has put your soul in pawn. Where do you think your soul stands

right now? The pawn is in the devil's hand. A person in the natural state is said to be under the power of Satan (Acts 26:18). There are only two ways to recover what has been pawned, and both are stated in Acts 20:21: repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Undo your works of sin through repentance. Honor Christ's merits by believing. On these two wings the soul flies to Christ — the ark — and finds safety.

THE SOUL'S MALADY AND CURE



Luke 5:31 — "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

The occasion for these words is set out in the surrounding passage. Levi was called away from the tax collector's table. Christ called him, and power went out with that word — Levi left everything, stood up, and followed Him (verse 28). Levi did not stop to consult his own interests. He did not reason: what will happen to my income? How will I live? I'll be giving up a profitable position at the customs office — and on top of that, following Christ means taking on persecution. He does not think this way. He receives the call and hurries after Christ. To show Christ a sign of his love, he throws a feast in His honor (verse 29): Levi made a great feast for Him in his own house. Christ always brought something with Him: Levi feasted Christ with his food, and Christ feasted him with salvation. Now, as Christ reclined at this feast, the Pharisees began to grumble (verse 30): "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors?" The Pharisees were offended that He went in and ate with tax collectors, who were regarded as the worst of sinners. They also brought a charge against Christ: why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners? Malice never runs short of something to accuse. Though the demons had declared Christ's holiness (Luke

4:34): "I know who You are — the Holy One of God" — the Pharisees charged Him as a sinner. See what malice can do: it will make a person say what even the devil will not say. If Christ — the spotless Lamb — could not escape the censures of the world, it is no wonder that His people are loaded with the slanders of the wicked.

Let us examine the charge they brought against Christ and see how groundless it was. They indicted Christ for associating with sinners.

First, Christ was doing exactly what His commission required. The commission He received from His Father was to come and save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

Second, Christ associated with sinners not to join them in their sins but to heal them of their sins. To accuse Christ for this — as Augustine points out — was like accusing a physician for going among plague victims. Christ hears this baseless accusation and in the text gives these envious Pharisees a silencing reply: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." He is saying: you Pharisees consider yourselves righteous — you think you need no Savior. But these poor tax collectors are sick and close to dying, and I have come as a physician to heal them. So do not be angry at a work of mercy. Even if you refuse to be healed, do not stand in the way of My healing others.

The text has two main parts.

First, the dying patients. Second, the healing physician.

First, the dying patients — those who are sick. Observe:

Sin is a disease of the soul (Psalm 103:3; Isaiah 53:4): "He has borne our griefs" — in the Hebrew: our sicknesses. At the beginning, humanity was created in a state of health. There was no sickness of soul — no suffering. The soul had its perfect beauty and wholeness. The mind was clear, the heart was pure, and the affections were tuned by God's own hand into perfect harmony. "God made man upright" (Ecclesiastes 7:29), but when Adam ate the forbidden fruit he fell sick — and would have died forever had God not provided a way of recovery. Three things deserve consideration to develop this point fully.

First, in what sense sin is compared to sickness. Second, what the diseases of the soul are. Third, that the sickness of sin is the worst kind.

In what sense sin is compared to sickness.

Sin may be compared to sickness in the way it is contracted.

Sickness is often caught through carelessness — some people get a chill by leaving off warm clothing. So when Adam grew careless of God's command and stripped off the garment of his innocence, he caught a disease. His sin turned the world, which had been a paradise, into a hospital.

Sickness is sometimes contracted through excess and self-indulgence. When our first parents threw off the restraint of obedience and ate of the forbidden tree, they and all their descendants fell into sickness. The tree of knowledge had sickness and death hidden beneath its leaves. We all became desperately ill by eating from that tree. Adam's excess has brought all of us into a state of fasting and mourning. Beyond the disease inherited through

Adam, we have added to it through our own personal sins. We have made ourselves sicker — which is why sinners are said to "grow worse and worse" (2 Timothy 3:13).

Sin may also be compared to sickness in its character. Sickness spreads throughout the whole body, working into every part and throwing the entire system into disorder. So sin does not stay in one corner of the soul but spreads through all of its faculties and throughout all the body's members (Isaiah 1:5-6): "The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot to the head there is no soundness in it, only wounds, bruises, and open sores."

Sin corrupts the understanding. Gregory Nazianzene calls the understanding the lamp of reason — and this lamp now burns dimly (Ephesians 4:18): "having their understanding darkened." Sin has drawn a veil over the understanding, casting a fog before our eyes, so that we know neither God nor ourselves. By nature we are only clever at doing evil (Jeremiah 4:22) — skilled at sin, inventive about our own ruin. The understanding is defiled (1 Corinthians 2:14). We can no more judge spiritual things until the Spirit opens our eyes than a blind man can judge colors. Our minds are prone to error — we call evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20). A straight stick looks bent when it is underwater. In the same way, to a mind still in its natural state, the straight line of truth appears crooked.

The memory is diseased as well. At first the memory was like a golden cabinet in which divine truths were kept safe. Now it is like a colander or a leaking vessel that lets everything good run out. The memory is like a sieve that sifts out the fine flour and keeps only the bran. So the memory lets saving truths slip away and re-

tains nothing but trivialities and empty things. Many people can recall a story they heard years ago while they have forgotten their creed. The memory is like a weak stomach that cannot hold food — everything comes back up. The most precious truths will not stay in the memory but are quickly gone.

The will is diseased. The will is the soul's commander — the master wheel. But how disordered and erratic it has become! In creation the will was like the golden bridle said to guide and govern a winged horse — it aligned itself with God's will. This was the will's language in the state of innocence: "I delight to do Your will, O God" (Psalm 40:8). But now it is disordered. It is like a rod of iron that refuses to bend to God (Isaiah 48:4). "You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:40). People will sooner die than come to their physician. The will is a rebel against God (Acts 7:51): "You always resist the Holy Spirit." The will is diseased.

The affections are sick as well.

First, the affection of desire. A sick person craves what is harmful — a person with a fever calls for wine. So the natural person, being spiritually sick, desires what is harmful. He has no desire for Christ and no hunger or thirst for righteousness. Instead he craves poison — he wants to drink his fill of sin. He loves death (Proverbs 8:36).

Second, the affection of grief. A person mourns the loss of money but not the loss of God's favor. He grieves to see plague or cancer in his body but feels no grief over the plague in his heart.

Third, the affection of joy. Many can rejoice over a piece of gold but not over the cross of Christ. The affections are sick and disordered.

The conscience is diseased (Titus 1:15): "Both their mind and their conscience are defiled." Conscience is either mistaken — binding a person to what is sinful (Acts 26:9): "I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus." Or it is silent — no longer warning people of sin, like a preacher who has been forced to stop speaking. Or it is dead (Ephesians 4:19): conscience has become numb and unresponsive. The habit of sinning has worn away any feeling of guilt. So the sickness of sin has spread over the entire soul, like that cloud that covered the whole sky (1 Kings 18:45).

Sickness weakens and drains the body. A sick person cannot walk properly. This sickness of sin weakens the soul in the same way (Romans 5:6): "While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died." In his original state, Adam was in some ways like the angels — he could serve God with swift energy and childlike joy. But sin brought sickness into the soul, cutting off the source of his strength. He is now stripped of all ability to serve God. Even where grace has begun to work, a Christian is not as helpless as before — but he is often very weak. When we find ourselves spiritually numb in duty, our holy affections barely alive, we should think: this is my sickness — sin has drained my strength. As Jephthah said to his daughter (Judges 11:35): "Alas, my daughter, you have brought me very low." So the soul may say: alas, my sin, you have brought me very low — almost to the gates of death.

Sickness dims the beauty of the body (Psalm 39:11): "When You rebuke a man for his sin, You dissolve his beauty like a moth." So sin is a soul-sickness — it has dimmed the soul's glory, turning its radiance to paleness. That beauty of grace which once shone like gold — "How the gold has grown dim!" The soul which once had a brilliant light — the mind glittering with knowledge, the will crowned with freedom, the affections burning like seraphs in love toward God — now the glory has departed. Sin has turned beauty into deformity. Just as some faces become so disfigured by sickness that they can hardly be recognized, the soul of man has been so tragically transformed by sin — having lost the image of God — that it is nearly unrecognizable (Joel 2:31). Sin has turned that sun of beauty which shone in the soul into a darkness without light.

Sickness takes away the sense of taste. A sick person cannot taste sweetness in his food. So the sinner, because of soul-sickness, has lost his taste for spiritual things. The word of God is bread to strengthen and wine to comfort — but the sinner tastes no sweetness in it. A child of God who has been made spiritual by grace savors the ordinances — the promise falls like honey from the comb (Psalm 19:10). But the natural person is sick and his taste is gone. Ever since tasting the forbidden fruit, he has lost his spiritual sense of taste.

Sickness robs life of its joy. A sick person takes no pleasure in anything — his life feels like a burden. So the sin-sick soul is empty of all true comfort. What laughter he has is only the pleasant dream of someone running a fever. He has no real claim to comfort. His sin is not pardoned — for all he knows, he could be in hell before nightfall.

Sickness ushers in death — it is the opening act of death. Sickness is like the cutting of a tree at the base, and death is the falling of the tree. So this disease of sin, if not cured in time, brings the second death.

What are the diseases of the soul? By breaking the vessel of original righteousness, Adam filled the soul full of diseases. The body is not afflicted with as many diseases as the soul. Pride is the swelling tumor of the soul; lust is the fever; false doctrine is the gangrene; unbelief is the plague of the heart; hypocrisy is the scurvy; hardness of heart is the stone; anger is the frenzy; malice is the wolf gnawing in the chest; greed is the dropsy; spiritual laziness is the wasting sickness; apostasy is the seizure. Here are eleven soul-diseases, and when they reach their full height they are dangerous — and most often prove fatal.

The third point is that sin is the worst sickness of all. To have a body covered with plague sores is dreadful — but to have the soul spotted with sin is far worse, as the following considerations show.

The body may be diseased and yet the conscience be at peace (Isaiah 33:24): "No resident will say, 'I am sick'" — he would hardly feel his sickness because his sin was pardoned. But when the soul is sick with a dominant sin, the conscience is in torment (Isaiah 57:21): "There is no peace for the wicked, says my God." When Francis Spira had renounced his former faith, his conscience burned like hell, and no spiritual remedy that ministers applied could ever put out that fire.

A person may have bodily diseases and yet be loved by God. Asa had a foot disease — gout — yet was a favorite with God (2 Kings 15:23). God's hand may lie heavily on a person while His

heart is still toward him. But diseases of the soul are signs of God's displeasure. As a holy God, He cannot but hate sin (Psalm 138:6): "The proud He knows from afar." God is repelled by a sinner's spiritual sores (Zechariah 11:8): "My soul loathed them."

Physical sickness at its worst only separates a person from the company of friends. But the disease of sin, if not cured, separates a person from God and the angels forever. Under the law, a person with a skin disease was shut out of the camp. This leprosy of sin, without the intervention of mercy, shuts people out of the camp of heaven (Revelation 21:8). This is the misery of those who die in their sins — they are cut off forever from the presence of God, in whose presence there is fullness of joy.

Consider what a desperate condition sin has brought us into — it has made us critically ill. How many sick, bedridden souls there are in the world — sick with pride, sick with lust! Sin has turned our homes and churches into hospitals filled with the diseased. What David's enemies said against him as a taunt is actually true of every person in their natural state (Psalm 41:8): "A wicked thing has clung to him." They carry the plague in their heart (1 Kings 8:38). Even those who have been renewed are only partly healed. The disease still lingers — some stirrings of corruption remain. From this sin-sickness flow all other diseases: plague, gout, kidney stones, fever (1 Corinthians 11:29-30): "For this reason many among you are weak and sick."

Since sin is a disease of the soul, how foolish are those who try to hide their sins! It is folly to conceal a disease. The wicked take more care to keep their sins hidden than to get them cured. As long as they can sin privately without being suspected, they think everything is fine. But there is a curse on the one who hides sin in a

secret place (Deuteronomy 27:15). Hiding and concealing a disease leads to a fatal outcome (Proverbs 28:13): "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper."

Since sin is a disease of the soul, how great is the need for the ministry of the Word! Ministers are physicians under God, appointed to cure sick souls (Ephesians 4:11) — they form a kind of medical college for the soul. Their work is to diagnose diseases and apply remedies — and it is hard work. While ministers are healing others, they are often themselves near death from the effort (Philippians 2:30). They find their people sick with every kind of disease — some poisoned by false doctrine, some made sick by love of the world, some stabbed at the heart by gross sin. How hard it is to heal souls so deeply infected! Many ministers wear themselves out in preaching before they can cure their patients. But though the work of ministry is exhausting, it is absolutely necessary. Where there are sick souls, there will always be need of spiritual physicians. How inexcusable then are those who attack and persecute the ministers of God (1 Corinthians 4:9)! Would it not be an act of cruelty and barbarism to pass a law banishing all physicians from the land? Is it not worse to see crowds of sick souls lying and bleeding while their spiritual physicians are removed from them? This is a sin that provokes God's wrath (2 Chronicles 36:16): "They mocked the messengers of God... until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, until there was no remedy." The Lord will wither the arm stretched out against His prophets.

Since sin is a disease of the soul, let this humble us. If anything can produce humility, this should — sin is a disease of the soul. If a woman had a beautiful face but a cancer in her body, it would keep her from being proud of her beauty. So, Christian, even though you

have knowledge and moral seriousness that look attractive from the outside, remember that your soul is diseased — here is a cancer within to keep you humble. This is certainly one reason why God leaves remnants of sin even in His own children: the sight of their own wounds makes the feathers of pride fall. Two things produce genuine humility: a sight of God's glory, and a sight of our own diseases. Though the saints have their golden graces, they also have their diseased spots. Since sin has made us wretched, let it make us humble. Since it has stolen our beauty, let it steal away our pride. Christians are never more lovely in God's eyes than when they are most repulsive in their own. The sins that truly humble us will never condemn us.

Since sin is a disease of the soul — and the most deadly disease — let us be afraid of it. If we had an ulcer in the lungs or a wasting fever, we would be terrified it might kill us. Be afraid of the sickness of sin, lest it bring the second death. You who are a drunkard or a blasphemer — tremble at your soul's diseases. Why do people not fear sin? Why do they not shake at the sight of this disease? The reason is this:

Spiritual numbness. Along with the fever of sin, they have a spiritual stupor (1 Timothy 4:2): "Their conscience has been seared as with a hot iron." The person who has an unbelieving heart and a seared conscience is in a desperate condition.

Presumption. Many imagine they can treat themselves. Though they are sick, they think they can make themselves well. They say a few prayers, shed a tear or two, and expect to recover quickly. But is it really so easy to be healed of sin? Is it easy to put the old nature to death? Beware of spiritual numbness. Fear your disease be-

fore it proves fatal. Doctors speak of a disease that makes people die laughing. In the same way, Satan tickles many with the pleasures of sin — and they die laughing.

Since sin is a disease of the soul, regard as your best friends those who work to rescue you from your sins. A patient is grateful to the physician who identifies his disease and works to restore him to health. When ministers point out your sins in love and work to reclaim you, receive it well. The worst they intend is to cure you of your sickness. David welcomed a healing rebuke (Psalm 141:5): "Let the righteous strike me — it is a kindness." Ministers are required by their calling to rebuke (2 Timothy 4:2). They must apply sharp medicine as well as soothing medicine (Titus 1:13): "Reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith." The Word cuts — like a surgeon who probes a wound and then lances and removes the infected tissue. So the ministers of Christ must rebuke sharply in order to save their dying patients. Who gets angry at a physician for prescribing a bitter medicine? Why should anyone be angry with Christ's ministers for reproving, when by office they are physicians and by love they are fathers? Yet how few are willing to receive a rebuke graciously (Amos 5:10): "They hate the one who reproves in the gate."

People do not welcome correction because they are in love with their sins. It is strange that anyone should love their own disease — yet so it is (Proverbs 1:22). Sin is the poison of the soul, yet people love it. And the person who loves his sin hates the one who rebukes it.

Sin takes possession of people with a kind of madness (Luke 15:17). People are frenzied in their sin (Jeremiah 50:38). When sickness grows so intense that a patient lies raving and out of his

mind, he turns on his physician and accuses him of coming to kill him. In the same way, when sin reaches its full height and the disease turns to frenzy, people turn on those who warn them of their sins. It shows wisdom to receive a correction (Proverbs 9:8): "Rebuke a wise man and he will love you." A wise person would rather take a bitter medicine than die of his disease.

Since sin is a disease of the soul, do not feed this disease. A wise person avoids whatever makes his illness worse. If he has a fever, he avoids wine that would inflame it. If he has kidney stones, he avoids salty food. Why should people not be as wise about their souls? If you are prone to drunkenness, do not fuel it with wine. If you are prone to malice, do not fuel it with thoughts of revenge. If you struggle with sexual lust, "make no provision for the flesh" (Romans 13:14). To feed a disease is to feed an enemy. Either kill your sin, or your sin will kill you.

Since sin is a disease of the soul, work to become aware of this disease. Few people are truly aware of their spiritual sickness — they think they are well and have nothing wrong. The church at Laodicea was a sick patient who thought herself healthy (Revelation 3:17): "You say, 'I am rich and have become wealthy and have need of nothing.'" Ask many people about the state of their soul, and they will say they have a good heart and have no doubt they will be saved. Why is it that when people are so desperately sick in their souls, on the very edge of hell, they still imagine themselves to be in perfectly good shape?

There is a spiritual film over their eyes — they cannot see their own wounds. Laodicea thought herself rich because she was blind (Revelation 3:17). The god of this world blinds people's eyes so they can see neither their disease nor the physician who could heal

them. Many thank God that their condition is good — not because they know they are blessed, but because they are ignorant of their danger. When Haman's face was covered, he was already close to execution. Pray with David: "Enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death" (Psalm 13:3).

People who are sick think themselves well because of pride. Alexander for a time believed he was the son of Jupiter and nothing less than a god. What an arrogant creature is man! Though he is dying of his disease, he thinks it beneath him to admit he is sick. Either he is not sick, he tells himself, or he can heal himself. If he has been poisoned, he reaches for the herb of his own righteousness as the cure (Romans 10:3).

People who are sick imagine themselves well because of self-love. A person in love will not believe a bad report about the one he loves. People are lovers of self (2 Timothy 3:2) — every man thinks well of himself. So he never suspects himself of being diseased. He would sooner question the truth of Scripture than admit to his own sickness.

Self-deception appears in two ways.

First, in hiding the disease. The heart conceals sin the way Rachel hid her father's idols (Genesis 31:34). Hazael did not think he was as sick as he was. He could not imagine that such wickedness lay hidden within him (2 Kings 8:13): "Is your servant a dog, that he would do this great thing?" Just as a viper's teeth are hidden within its gums, so there is much corruption buried in the heart — hidden, veiled, kept out of sight.

Second, the heart holds a distorted mirror before the eyes, making a person appear good and his condition sound. The heart can deceive with counterfeit grace. This is why people remain unaware of their true spiritual state and think themselves well when they are dying.

People take an inflated view of their own spiritual condition through mistaken thinking, and this mistake takes two forms.

They rely on outward privileges. They were raised within reach of the church, they were baptized, they have been fed on the Word of God. Therefore they assume they are in a good condition (Judges 17:13): "Then Micah said, 'Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, for the Levite has become my priest.'" But this is a mistake. Outward privileges do not save. What does it benefit anyone to receive the ordinances without being changed by them? A child can die with its mother's breast still in its mouth. Many of the Jews perished even though Christ Himself was their preacher.

The other mistake is described by the apostle (2 Corinthians 10:12): "They measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves — they are not wise." Here is a double error.

They measure themselves by themselves — that is, they notice they are not as bad as they once were, and therefore conclude their condition is good. A dwarf may be taller than he used to be and still be a dwarf. A patient may be less sick than before and still be far from well. A person may be better than he was and still not be good.

They compare themselves with others around them. They see they are not as wicked or godless as other people, so they think themselves well because they are not as sick as their neighbors. This is a mistake. A person can die of consumption just as surely as of the plague. One man may not be as far from heaven as another and yet still be very far from heaven. Go to the law and to the testimony — the Word of God is the true standard by which the state of our souls is to be judged.

Let us guard against this danger — imagining our condition is better than it is. Let us guard against spiritual numbness — being sick in our souls yet feeling nothing. People speak of a light within them. But the natural light within them is not sufficient to show them the diseases of their souls. This inner light tells them they are healthy and have no need of a physician.

What an infinite mercy it is for a person to be made aware of his sin, and seeing himself sick, to cry out with David: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). Is it not a mercy when a person who has lost his reason is restored to his senses? So it is a mercy when someone who is spiritually deranged and in a stupor comes to himself — and sees both his wound and his remedy! Until the sinner is made aware of his disease, the medicine of mercy does not yet belong to him.

Since sin is a disease of the soul, work hard to get this disease healed. If a person had a disease in his body — pneumonia or cancer — he would use every available means to be cured. The woman in the Gospel who had suffered from bleeding for years spent everything she had on physicians (Luke 8:43). Be even more urgent to have your soul cured than your body. Make David's prayer your own (Psalm 41:4): "Heal my soul, for I have sinned against You."

Do you have a wasting body? Pray all the more earnestly to God to heal the far deeper disease within your soul. Go to God first for the cure of your soul (James 5:14): "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him." Notice that James does not say: let him call for the physician — but the elders, that is, the ministers. Most people send for the physician first and the minister second, showing they are far more concerned about their body than their soul. But if diseases of the soul are more dangerous and deadly, we should seek the spiritual cure before the physical. "Heal my soul, for I have sinned."

Until we are cured, we are unfit to do anything for God. A sick person cannot work. While the disease of sin is at full strength in us, we are unfit for any spiritual service. We can neither work for God nor work out our own salvation. As long as sin's disease holds us, we are lame and bedridden — unable to function. We read of a sinner's works — but they are dead works (Hebrews 6:1).

If we are not cured, we remain under a curse. If the disease remains upon us, the wrath of God remains upon us.

But how can we get this disease of sin healed? This brings us to the second part of the text — the healing physician: "Those who are well have no need of a physician."

Jesus Christ is a physician of the soul. Ministers are physicians whom Christ sends out into the world in His name. He says to the apostles, and through them to all His ministers: "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). That is: I am with you to support and bless you, and to make your ministry effective for healing. But while ministers are physicians, they are only under-physicians. Jesus Christ is the chief physician. He is the one

who teaches all our remedies and accompanies our labors — without Him, no medicine we prescribe will ever work. All the ministers in heaven could not produce a single cure without the help of this great physician. I will show: first, that Christ is a physician; second, why He became a physician; third, that He is the only physician; fourth, how He heals His patients; fifth, that He is the best physician.

That Christ is a physician — it is one of His titles (Exodus 15:26): "I am the Lord who heals you." He is a physician of the body: He opened blind eyes, cleansed lepers, healed the sick, and raised the dead (Matthew 8:16). He is the one who puts healing power into medicine. And He is a physician of the soul (Psalm 147:3): "He heals the brokenhearted." We are all, in our various ways, helpless and diseased. Christ is the soul-physician who heals these diseases. To show His healing power, Christ is compared in Scripture to the following:

The bronze serpent (Numbers 21:9): those who had been bitten were healed by looking at the bronze serpent. So when the soul has been stung by the ancient serpent, it is healed by looking to Christ.

The good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-34): "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine." We have wounded ourselves through sin, and the wound would have been fatal — had not Christ that good Samaritan poured in wine and oil.

The trees along the sanctuary river (Ezekiel 47:12): "Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing." So the Lord Jesus — that tree of life in paradise — has healing power. He heals our pride, our unbelief, and more. As He nourishes our graces, so He heals our corruptions.

Why Christ became a physician.

First, because of His calling. God the Father called Him to practice as a physician and anointed Him to the work of healing (Luke 4:18): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted." Christ came into the world as into a hospital — to heal sin-sick souls. Although this was a glorious work, Christ would not undertake it until He had been commissioned by His Father. Christ was anointed and appointed to the work of a physician — and this is a pattern for us. We should not involve ourselves in any work without a proper calling — to do otherwise is to step outside our proper sphere.

Second, Christ undertook this healing work because of our desperate need for a physician. Christ came to be our physician not because we deserved Him but because we needed Him. It was not our merit but our misery that drew Christ from heaven. Had He not come, we would have died of our wounds. Our disease was not ordinary — it had seized every part of us. It made us not merely sick, but dead. And remedies were needed that no one but Christ could provide.

Third, Christ came as a physician out of the goodness of His own heart. He is like the good Samaritan who had compassion on the wounded man (Luke 10:33). A physician may visit a patient

only for pay — caring less about helping the patient than helping himself. But Christ came purely out of compassion. There was nothing in us to attract Christ to heal us. Just as sin made us sick, it also made us poor. So Christ came as a physician not hoping to receive anything from us, but moved by His own goodness. "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely" (Hosea 14:4). Love set Christ to work — not only His Father's commission but His own compassion moved Him.

The third point is that Christ is the only physician. Acts 4:12: "There is salvation in no one else." One physician — and one alone — is sufficient. The Roman church would have other healers besides Christ. They would make angels their physicians. But all the angels in heaven cannot heal a single sick soul. They are described by their wings (Isaiah 6:2), but they have no healing under their wings. The Roman church also urges people to heal themselves through their own merits. Adam ate the apple that made him and all his descendants sick, but he could find no herb in paradise to cure him. Our own merits are more likely to condemn us than heal us. To turn to other physicians and remedies is like the Israelites, in contempt of the bronze serpent Moses set up, erecting bronze serpents of their own. In physical illness it may be wise to seek multiple physicians. But when it comes to the soul, if any other physician is added alongside Christ, the patient will surely die.

How Christ heals His patients.

There are four things in Christ that are healing.

His Word is healing (Psalm 107:20): "He sent His word and healed them." His Word in the mouth of His ministers is healing. When the spirit is wounded and in darkness, Christ creates lips

that speak peace (Isaiah 57:19). The written Word is a treasury in which God has stored His most powerful medicines to restore sick souls. The preached Word is the opening of that treasury and the applying of those medicines to the patient. We may look at the word as a weak instrument — what can a person's breath do to save a soul? But "the power of the Lord was present to heal" (Luke 5:17). Christ makes His Word convincing, converting, and comforting.

Caution: the Word does not heal everyone. To some it is not a healing word but a condemning one (2 Corinthians 2:16): "To the one we are an aroma from death to death." Two kinds of patients die of their disease.

Those who sin presumptuously — who know something is sin and do it anyway (Job 24:13): "They are of those who rebel against the light." David prays (Psalm 19:13): "Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins."

Those who sin maliciously — when the disease reaches this point, the patient will die (Hebrews 10:29). But to those who belong to God's elect, the Word is the healing medicine Christ applies. "He sent His word and healed them."

Christ's wounds are healing (Isaiah 53:5): "By His scourging we are healed." Christ made a medicine from His own body and blood. The physician died to cure the patient. The pelican, when her young are bitten by serpents, is said to feed them with her own blood to revive them. In the same way, when we were bitten by the ancient serpent, Jesus Christ prescribes a remedy of His own blood to heal and restore us. The blood of Christ is the salvation of the Christian. The blood of Christ — being the blood of one who is

both God and man — has infinite merit to satisfy God and infinite power to heal us. This is the balm of Gilead that restores a soul that is sick unto death. Balm, as naturalists describe it, is a juice that weeps out of a small shrub when it is cut with glass. It was long regarded as highly precious — its fragrance was rich, and its healing power was remarkable. It could cure ulcers and the bites of serpents. This balm is a picture of Christ's blood — it has the most powerful healing virtue. It cures the ulcer of sin and the sting of temptation. It earns for us justification (Romans 5:9). How precious is this balm of Gilead! By this blood we enter into heaven.

Christ's Spirit is healing. The blood of Christ heals the guilt of sin; the Spirit of Christ heals the pollution of sin. The Spirit is compared to oil — "the anointing" (Isaiah 61:1) — showing the Spirit's healing character. Oil heals wounds. Christ by His Spirit heals the rebellion of the will and the hardness of the heart. Sin may not be completely removed in this life, but it is subdued.

Christ's rod is healing (Isaiah 27:9). Christ never wounds except to heal. The rod of affliction is used to restore the sick patient. David's bones were broken so that his soul might be healed. God uses affliction as a surgeon uses his lance — to drain the poison and corruption from the soul and make way for a cure.

But if Christ is a physician, why are not all people healed?

Because most do not know they are sick. They cannot see the sores and wounds of their own souls. Will Christ heal those who see no need of Him? Many ignorant people thank God that they have a good heart — but a heart that lacks grace can no more be good than a body that lacks health can be sound.

Not all are healed because they love their sickness (Psalm 52:3): "You love evil." Many embrace their disease. Augustine says that before his conversion he prayed against sin, but his heart whispered: not yet, Lord. How many love their disease more than their physician! While sin is loved, Christ's medicines are rejected.

Not all are healed because they do not seek the physician. When they have any physical ailment they immediately send for a doctor, but their souls are sick and they never seek their physician Christ. "You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:40). Christ takes it as an insult that people will not come to Him. Christ will not welcome those patients who turn to Him only as a last resort. You who despise Christ in times of health — Christ may leave you to yourself in times of sickness.

Not all are healed because they want to heal themselves and make their own religious duties their saviors. The Roman church teaches people to be their own physicians. But Christ will have all the credit for the cure, or He will not heal at all. It is not our tears but His blood that saves.

Not all are healed because they do not take the medicine Christ prescribes. They want to be cured, but they are unwilling to follow the treatment. Christ prescribes the bitter medicine of repentance and the demanding treatment of putting sin to death — and they refuse it. They would rather die than take the medicine. If a patient refuses to follow the physician's prescriptions, it is no wonder he is not healed. Christians, you have received many prescriptions — have you followed them? Ask your conscience. Many who hear the Word are like foolish patients who send to the doctor for medicine, receive it, and then let it sit untouched on the shelf. The probab-

ity is that you have not followed the Gospel's prescriptions — because the Word has had no visible effect on your heart. You are as proud, as worldly, as resentful as you ever were.

Not all are healed because they have no confidence in their physician. When Christ came to heal anyone, He first asked: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (Matthew 9:28). This destroys many. The sinner says: there is no mercy for me — Christ cannot heal me. Take heed: your unbelief is worse than all your other diseases. Did not Christ pray for those who crucified Him: "Father, forgive them"? Some of those who had a hand in shedding His blood were later saved! Why then do you say Christ cannot heal you? Unbelief dishonors Christ, blocks the cure, and seals shut the wounds of Christ. Millions die of their disease because they will not trust their physician.

The fifth and final point is that Christ is the best physician. To set out the praise and honor of Jesus Christ, let me show you how He surpasses all other physicians.

He is the most skilled physician. No disease is too hard for Him (Psalm 103:3): "Who heals all your diseases." The pool of Bethesda may picture Christ's blood (John 5:4): whoever stepped in first after the water was stirred was made well of whatever disease he had. Some diseases physicians cannot cure — advanced lung disease, certain blockages, advanced infections. Some diseases are the embarrassment of the medical profession. But there is no wound too deep for Christ's skill. He can cure the gangrene of sin even when it has reached the heart. He healed Mary Magdalene, a notorious sinner. He healed Paul, who had been breathing threats against the church — so dramatically that Paul himself stands in wonder at the cure (1 Timothy 1:13): "I obtained mercy." Christ

heals diseases of the mind and diseases of the heart — which should keep trembling souls from despair. The sinner says: no one has ever been as sick as I am! But look to your physician Christ, who has healing under His wings. He can melt a heart of stone and wash away dark sins in the crimson of His blood. There are no hopeless cases with Christ. There is one disease Christ does not heal — the sin against the Holy Spirit, called "a sin to death" (1 John 5:16). There is no healing for this. Not because Christ lacks the power to cure it, but because the sinner refuses to be cured. A king could pardon a traitor, but if the traitor will accept no pardon, he must die. The sin against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable because the sinner wants no pardon. He despises Christ's blood and insults His Spirit — therefore his sin has no atoning sacrifice left (Hebrews 10:26-29).

Christ is the best physician because He heals the more important part — the soul. Other physicians can heal the liver or spleen. Christ heals the heart. They can treat diseased blood. Christ cleanses the defiled conscience (Hebrews 9:14): "How much more will the blood of Christ purify your conscience from dead works?" Galen and Hippocrates might treat kidney disease, but Christ heals the hardness of the heart. The best physician is the one who heals the most vital part. The soul is immortal and angelic. Man was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) — not with respect to his body but his soul. Since the soul is so divine and noble, healing the soul far exceeds any healing of the body.

Christ is the best physician because He causes people to feel their disease. The sickness of sin, though the most deadly, is the least felt. Many people are spiritually sick, but the devil has given them such numbing medicine that they sleep the sleep of death —

and all the thunder of the Word cannot wake them. But the Lord Jesus, this blessed physician, wakes the soul out of its stupor, and then there is real hope of recovery. The jailer was never closer to a cure than when he cried out: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30)

Christ shows more love to His patients than any other physician has ever shown. This appears in five ways.

In the long journey He made from heaven to earth.

In that He comes to His patients without being called. Ordinarily the sick send for their physicians and make many appeals. But this physician comes on His own initiative. "I was found by those who did not seek Me" (Isaiah 65:1). He reaches us with mercy before we reach out to Him. He pleads with us to be healed. Had Christ not first come to us and — like the good Samaritan — poured in wine and oil, we would have died of our wounds.

This physician shed His own blood to cure His patient (Isaiah 53:5): "He was pierced through for our transgressions" — through His wounds we can see straight into His heart.

Our rejection and unkindness does not drive Christ away from us. An ordinary physician, when provoked by a patient, leaves in anger and does not return. We abuse our physician, push Him away, and shut the door on Him. Yet Christ does not abandon us. He comes again and again, applying His healing balm. "I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people" (Isaiah 65:2). Christ absorbs our wrongs and returns, determined to complete the cure. What love this heavenly physician shows!

Christ Himself drank the bitter cup that we deserved to drink — and by His taking the medicine, we are healed and saved. No physician has ever shown such love to a patient.

Christ is the most affordable physician. Sickness wastes not only the body but the purse. Physicians' fees are a burden, but Jesus Christ gives His medicine freely at no charge (Isaiah 55:1): "Come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost." He asks us to bring nothing to Him but broken hearts. And when He has healed us, all He asks in return is our love — which could hardly seem more reasonable.

Christ heals with more ease than any other physician. Other physicians use pills, potions, and bloodletting. Christ heals with simpler means — with a word. Christ drove out a demon with a single spoken command (Mark 9:25). So when the soul is spiritually oppressed, Christ can heal with a word. He can even heal with a look. When Peter had fallen into sin, Christ looked at him — and Peter wept. Christ's look melted Peter into repentance. It was a healing look. If Christ simply casts a look upon the soul, He can restore it. This is why David prays for a look from God (Psalm 119:132): "Turn to me and be gracious to me."

Christ is the most tenderhearted physician. He has ended His suffering, but not His compassion. How deeply He cares for sick souls! He is no less full of sympathy than of skill (Hosea 11:8): "My heart is turned within Me." Christ shows His compassion by matching His medicine to the patient's strength. Medicine that is too strong for a frail constitution endangers life. Christ gives medicine that is gentle enough to work kindly and bring real healing. Though He will press sinners, He will not break the bruised reed. What a stirring of Christ's heart toward poor souls who feel

themselves heartsick with sin! He holds their head when they are fainting. He brings the restoratives of His promises to keep the sick patient from slipping away. Christians, you may have dark thoughts about your physician Christ — thinking He is harsh and means to destroy you. But consider the movements of His heart toward humble and broken-hearted sinners! Psalm 147:3: "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Every groan from the patient goes to the heart of this physician.

Physicians sometimes prescribe medicine that harms the patient in two situations. Either they have not identified the true cause of the disease and give the wrong treatment — something heating when cooling is needed. Or they identify the cause correctly but the treatment that helps one condition harms another. This happens when both the liver and spleen are diseased — the medicine that helps the liver may harm the spleen. But Christ always prescribes exactly the right treatment, and He also blesses the treatment. If the soul's disease is pride, He humbles it with affliction. God turned Nebuchadnezzar out to eat grass to cure his swelling arrogance. If the soul's disease is laziness, Christ applies some rousing scripture (Matthew 12:11; Luke 13:24; 1 Peter 4:18). If the disease is hardness of heart, Christ uses appropriate remedies — sometimes the force of the law's warnings, sometimes His mercies, sometimes He dissolves the hardness in His own blood. If the soul is fainting through unbelief, Christ brings some scripture to revive it (Matthew 12:20): "A bruised reed He will not break." Isaiah 57:16: "I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before Me, and the breath of those

whom I have created." So the Lord Jesus always prescribes the treatment that fits the disease and will work effectively toward the cure.

Christ never fails to achieve a successful outcome. Physicians may have skill but not always results — patients often die under their care. But Christ never undertakes to heal anyone without completing the cure (John 17:12): "Those whom You gave Me I have kept, and not one of them was lost." Judas was not given to Christ to be healed. But no one who was given to Christ has ever perished.

How can I know that I am one of those given to Christ to be healed?

Ask yourself: do you feel like a sick patient who knows he will die without the physician? Do you sense yourself bleeding to death without the balm of Gilead? Then you are one of Christ's patients, and you will never die under His care. How could any of those perish whom Christ has undertaken to heal? As He applies the balm of His blood, He also pours out the fragrance of His prayers for them (John 17:11): "Holy Father, keep them in Your name which You have given Me." Satan could never charge Christ with losing a single one of His patients.

Other physicians can only help those who are sick, but Christ heals those who are dead (Ephesians 2:1): "He made you alive, you who were dead in your trespasses and sins." A sinner shows all the signs of death — the pulse of his affections does not beat, he does not breathe after holiness. But Christ is a physician for the dead. Of every person Christ heals, it may truly be said: he was dead and is alive again (Luke 15:32).

Christ heals not only our diseases but our deformities. An earthly physician can restore a sick person to health, but if he is deformed, he cannot make him beautiful. Christ gives not only health but beauty. Sin has made us ugly and misshapen. Christ's treatments do not merely remove the sickness — they remove the disfigurement. He not only makes us well but lovely (Hosea 14:4-6): "I will heal their apostasy... his beauty will be like the olive tree." Jesus Christ does not consider the healing complete until He has drawn His own beautiful image upon the soul. Christ not only heals but adorns. He is called the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) — not only because of the healing under His wings but because of the rays of beauty He places upon the soul.

Christ is the most generous physician. Ordinarily patients enrich their physicians — here the physician enriches the patient. Christ advances all His patients. He does not just cure them — He crowns them (Revelation 2:10). He not only raises them from the sickbed but to the throne. He gives the sick person not only health but heaven.

Here is good news: there is balm in Gilead — there is a physician to heal sin-sick souls. The angels who fell had no physician sent to them — but we have One. The Sun of Righteousness has risen in our world, with healing in His wings. If a person had been poisoned, what a comfort to hear there was an herb in the garden that could heal him! Sinner, you are full of corrupting disease — your soul is deeply infected. But there is a physician who can restore you. Though there is an ancient serpent to sting us with his temptations, there is a bronze serpent to heal us with His blood.

Since Christ is a physician, make use of Him for your diseased soul. "As the sun was setting, all who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to Him, and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them" (Luke 4:40). You who have put off seeking a physician until now — while the sun of the Gospel and the sun of your life is nearly setting, bring your sick soul to Christ to be healed. Christ grieves that though people are sick to death, they will not come to their physician (John 5:40): "You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life." In physical illness the physician is the first one sought. In soul-sickness the physician is the last one sought. But here are several objections that troubled souls raise against coming to Christ their physician.

Objection one: I am discouraged from going to Christ because of my unworthiness. Like the centurion who sent to Christ about his sick servant (Luke 7:6): "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof." So many a trembling soul says: Christ is a physician — but who am I that He should come under my roof and heal me! I am unworthy of mercy, as Mephibosheth said to King David (2 Samuel 9:8): "What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?" To those whose hearts are broken by a sense of their own unworthiness, and who are discouraged from coming to Christ, let me say five things in reply.

Who did Christ shed His blood for if not the unworthy? (1 Timothy 1:15): "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." Christ came into the world as into a hospital, to a company of lame and bedridden souls.

Though we are not worthy by any legal standard, we may be worthy in the Gospel sense. Part of our worthiness is to see our own unworthiness. "Do not fear, you worm Jacob" (Isaiah 41:14). You may be a worm in your own eyes — yet a dove in God's eyes.

Though we are unworthy, Christ is worthy. We do not deserve healing, but Christ has earned mercy for us. He has an abundance of blood to supply what our tears could never cover.

Who has ever been saved because they were worthy? What worthiness was there in Paul before his conversion? What worthiness was there in Mary Magdalene, out of whom seven demons had been cast? But free grace pitied them and healed them. God does not find us worthy — He makes us worthy.

If we wait until we are worthy before we come to Christ to be healed, we will never come at all. And let me tell you — this talk of worthiness has the scent of pride. We want to have something of our own to bring. We imagine that if only we had sufficient preparation and personal virtue, then Christ would accept us. This is trying to pay our physician for a cure we can never earn. Do not let a sense of unworthiness stop you. Come to Christ to be healed (Mark 10:49): "Take courage; get up, He is calling for you."

Objection two: I fear I am not within the scope of Christ's commission. I am not among those who are appointed to be saved — and so even though Christ is a physician, I will not be healed.

We must guard against drawing despairing conclusions about ourselves. It is extreme presumption for us to claim to know more than the angels. All the angels in heaven cannot resolve this question: who are the elect and who are not?

You say you are not within the scope of Christ's commission. Read Christ's commission again and see who He came to heal (Luke 4:18): "He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted." Has God touched your heart with genuine sorrow for sin? Do you grieve over your failures and ingratitude toward Christ? Do you weep more out of love for Christ than out of fear of hell? Then you are a brokenhearted sinner — and you are within the scope of Christ's commission. A bleeding Christ will heal a broken heart.

Objection three: my sins are so many that I can never be healed. I am sick with many diseases at once.

Then you have all the more need of a physician. Is it a reasonable argument to say to a physician: I am diseased, so stay away from me? No — it is the very reason to say: come and heal me. Our sins should humble us, not drive us away from Christ. If we had no diseases, Christ would have no work to do in the world.

Objection four: my disease has worsened and reached a critical state — my sin has greatly increased.

The healing that Christ's blood provides is wider than your wound. "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). All sins are alike to Christ's blood. He can cure the greatest sin just as easily as the smallest. Do you have an open, flowing wound of sin? The wound in Christ's side can heal yours.

Objection five: my disease is old and deeply rooted, and I fear it is past curing.

Though your disease is long-standing, Christ can heal it. Christ does not say: if this disease had been treated sooner it might have been cured. He is skilled at old wounds. The thief on the cross had an old, festering disease — but Christ cured it in a moment.

Zacchaeus was a long-established sinner — a tax collector who had wronged many — but Christ healed him. Christ sometimes grafts His grace onto an old root. We read that Christ healed people at the sun's setting (Luke 4:40) — He heals some sinners at the very sunset of their lives.

Objection six: after being healed, my disease has broken out again. I have relapsed into the same sin — and so I fear there is no healing for me.

It is rare that God allows His children to experience such relapses, though it is possible — through the withdrawal of grace and the pressure of temptation — to fall back into sin. These relapses into sin are grievous. They open the mouth of conscience to accuse and silence the voice of God's Spirit that would otherwise speak peace. But if the soul is genuinely humbled — if the one who has relapsed is a repenting sinner — let him not drop the anchor of hope but return to his soul-physician. Jesus Christ can cure a relapse. He healed David's relapse and Cranmer's relapse. "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). Christ appears in the court as the advocate for the client. As He poured out His blood on the cross, so He pours out His prayers at the heavenly altar (Hebrews 7:25): "He always lives to make intercession for them." So do not be discouraged from going to your physician. Though your disease has broken out again, Christ has fresh applications of His blood for you. He can cure a relapse.

Objection seven: there is no healing for me — I fear I have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit.

The very fact that you fear you have committed it is a sign that you have not.

Let me ask: why do you think you have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit? Is it because you have grieved the Spirit of God?

Not every grieving of the Spirit amounts to that fatal sin. We grieve the Spirit when we sin against His light. When the Spirit is grieved, He may withdraw for a time, taking away all His comfort and leaving the soul in darkness (Isaiah 50:10). But not every grieving of the Spirit is the sin against the Holy Spirit. When a child of God sins, his conscience strikes him. And the person whose conscience strikes him for sin has not committed the unpardonable sin. When a child of God has grieved the Spirit, he does what Noah did — when the dove flew out of the ark, he opened the window to let it back in. A godly person does not shut his heart against the Spirit the way a wicked person does (Acts 7:51). He opens his heart to welcome the Spirit back in. Christian, is that not how it is with you? Then take heart — you have not sinned the sin against the Holy Spirit. That sin involves a malicious and deliberate rejection of the Spirit — which you tremble even to contemplate.

So put aside all these doubts and objections. Whatever the diseases of your soul may be, come to Christ for healing. Believe in His blood and you can be saved. You have seen what a skilled and able physician Christ is — what powerful remedies He has, how eager He is to cure sick souls. What remains but to cast yourself on His merits to heal and save you? Of all sins, unbelief is the worst — because it insults Christ, as if He were unable to produce a cure. Christian, trust your physician (John 3:15): "that whoever believes

in Him shall not perish." Say as Queen Esther said (Esther 4:16): "I will go in to the king, which is against the law — and if I perish, I perish." So say: the Lord Jesus is a physician who can heal me. I will commit myself to His blood. If I perish, I perish. I have a promise that invites me to come to Christ (John 6:37): "The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." Faith is a healing grace. We read that when the Israelites were burying a man and in haste threw him into the tomb of Elisha, as soon as he touched the bones of the prophet, he came back to life and stood up (2 Kings 13:21). So if a person is dead in sin, let him be cast into Christ's grave — let him by faith touch Christ who was dead and buried — and he will come alive, and his soul will be healed. There is no path to a cure except through faith. A healing plaster, however powerful, does nothing for a wound unless it is applied to it. Even if the plaster is made from Christ's own blood, it will not heal unless it is applied by faith. The bronze serpent was a powerful remedy — but those who did not look at it received no benefit. So though there is healing power in Christ, unless we look to Him with the eye of faith, we cannot be healed. Above all else, seek faith. This is the all-healing grace — this hand that reaches out and touches Christ draws healing from Him.

Not that faith has more intrinsic worth than other graces — but it is uniquely effective because it unites us to Christ. If a person had a stone set in a ring that could heal many diseases, we might say the ring heals — but it is not the ring, it is the stone in the ring that does the work. So faith saves and heals — not by its own power, but by laying hold of Christ and drawing His life-giving grace down into the soul.

Since Jesus Christ is the spiritual physician, labor to hasten the healing of your soul.

Think how little time we have left here — and let that urgency drive you toward the cure. Solomon says there is a time to be born and a time to die (Ecclesiastes 3:2) — he mentions no time for living, as if life were too brief to deserve mention. The body is called a vessel (1 Thessalonians 4:4). This vessel is filled with breath. Sickness drains its contents, and death empties it entirely. Hasten your soul's cure. Death is on its swift march, and if it catches you unprepared, there is no cure to be found in the grave (Ecclesiastes 9:10): "There is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going."

Now is truly the season for healing. Now is the day of grace. Now Christ pours out His remedies; now He sends out His ministers and His Spirit. "Behold, now is the acceptable time" (2 Corinthians 6:2). In earlier times there were certain days when the king would heal those suffering from a particular illness. The day of grace is such a healing day. If we neglect the day of grace, the next day that comes for us will be a day of wrath (Romans 2:5). Hasten the healing of your soul. Rather go without food than go without the cure. Sin will not only kill — it will condemn.

To obtain the cure:

Come to the healing waters of the sanctuary. The Spirit of God may suddenly stir those waters. Next Sunday, for all you know, may be a healing day for your soul.

Ask others to pray for you. When your body is sick, you seek the prayers of others. The prayers of God's people are powerful medicines and balms for sick souls.

Is Jesus Christ a physician of the soul? Then let me speak to those who have been in some measure healed of their deadly disease. I have four things to say.

First, break forth in thankfulness. Though sin is not yet fully eradicated and there are still stirrings of the disease, its ruling power has been broken. You have been healed enough that you will not die of it (John 3:16; John 11:26). Those who were healed by the bronze serpent eventually died of other causes. But those healed by Christ will never truly die. Sin may trouble you — but it will not condemn you. How much cause you have to love and praise your physician! The Lord Jesus has drawn out the core of your disease and broken its curse. Share what God has done for you (Psalm 66:16): "Come and hear, all who fear God, and I will tell of what He has done for my soul." Think of a man cured of a long-standing illness — how glad and grateful he is! He tells everyone about the medicine that healed him. Say the same: let me tell you what God has done for my soul. He has cured me of an old disease — a hard and unbelieving heart — a disease that has sent millions to hell. Truly we can endure any other sickness if this soul-sickness is cured. Luther said: Lord, strike and wound me wherever You will — if only sin is pardoned. Let the high praises of God be always in your mouth (Psalm 149:6). God expects thankfulness as His due. He marvels when people fail to bring it (Luke 17:17): "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?"

Second, if you have been healed, be careful to avoid infected company, lest you catch the disease again. The wicked function like spiritual agents of temptation. Lot was a marvel to his generation — he lived in Sodom when it was a breeding ground of disease and yet did not catch the infection.

Third, guard against relapse. After recovering from illness, people are rightly afraid of falling sick again — so beware of spiritual relapse. Has God softened your heart? Take care not to let it harden again. Has He healed you in some measure of spiritual deadness? Do not slip back into drowsy complacency. Such a relapse can bring such turmoil and agony of conscience that you may go weeping to your grave. Take great care not to fall sick again. "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you" (John 5:14).

Fourth, have pity on those around you who are sick to death. Show your godliness through your compassion. Do you have a child who is physically healthy but spiritually sick? Pity him and pray for him. David wept and fasted for his sick child (2 Samuel 12:16). Your child carries the plague of sin in his heart — and you passed it on to him. Weep and fast on his behalf. Do you have a spouse who — while able to walk around — is inwardly sick, in the grip of sin's ruling power? Let your heart ache for them. Lift up a prayer on their behalf. The prayer of faith can save a sick soul. Prayer is the most powerful medicine available in a desperate case. You who have experienced both the disease of sin and the mercy of your physician — learn from that experience to pity others.

Is Christ a physician of souls? Then let us go to Christ to heal this sick and dying nation. England — God knows — is a sick patient. The whole head is sick; the whole heart is faint. The body of the nation suffers from a deep, systemic illness. Those in authority, the ministry, and common people alike are diseased — and those who claimed to be our healers have proven to be physicians of no value. We have spent our resources on these physicians, but our wounds are not healed (Jeremiah 14:19): "Why have You stricken

us so that we are beyond healing?" Instead of healing us, those who should have been our physicians have made the nation sicker by offering a tolerance of sin — like giving strong drink to a fever patient, which only inflames the disease. England is sick because she is sinful — sick with false doctrine, immorality, and drunkenness — so sick that we may fear the end is near. And the worst sign is that though balm has been poured into her wounds and God's precious ordinances have been applied, she is still not healed — a sign of deep corruption that is hard to cure.

This spiritual sickness in the land has produced dreadful fruit: division, oppression, and bloodshed — the very sinews and arteries of the nation are nearly torn apart, so that God has fulfilled His warning against us (Micah 6:13): "I will make you desolate because of your sins." We have made ourselves sick by sinning, and God has made us sick by striking us. What remains but to go to the great physician of souls — whose blood sprinkles many nations — and plead that He would apply some healing medicine to dying England? God can heal with a single word. He can grant repentance as readily as deliverance. He can set us right again. Let all the people of the land cry out between the porch and the altar: "Spare Your people, O Lord" (Joel 2:17). Our prayers and tears may move Christ to heal us (Psalm 106:23): "Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen one stood in the gap before Him, to turn away His wrath from destroying them." Let us never stop imploring our heavenly physician — until He lays His healing hand on England's wound and brings about her recovery.

THE BEAUTY OF GRACE



Peter 1:2 — Grace and peace be multiplied to you.

1 The blessed apostle, having experienced the power and richness of grace, was captivated by it. And since this wine of paradise is so sweet, he commends it to these scattered Christians to whom he writes, praying that they would receive more and more of it.

Grace and peace be multiplied to you.

The words take the form of a greeting: grace and peace to you. When we greet our friends, we could wish them no greater blessing than grace and peace. Other mercies lie outside this circle and are distributed broadly among people in general. But grace is a special gift bestowed on those who are heaven's favorites. Notice two things in the words: first, the connection; second, the order.

The connection: grace and peace. The way to have peace is to have grace. Grace produces peace — one is the root, the other the flower. Peace is the sweet water that drips from the heart that grace has made new.

The order: first grace, then peace. Grace has priority. Grace and peace are like two sisters, but grace is the elder. Allow me to present the elder before the younger — grace to you be multiplied.

To set this out clearly, consider: first, what is meant by grace; second, who produces it; third, why it is called grace; fourth, why it is so necessary.

What is meant by grace? The word grace has several meanings in Scripture.

Sometimes grace means the favor of God (Genesis 6:8): "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" — God looked upon him with gracious favor.

Grace is sometimes used to mean beauty or attractiveness (James 1:11): "The flower falls, and its beauty perishes."

Grace is sometimes used in a loose and improper sense to mean the outward appearance of grace. Just as we call the image in a mirror a face — though it is only the reflection of a face — so John 2:23 speaks of many who "believed in His name." That believing was only a show of faith, as Augustine and Theophylact observe.

Grace is also used in its true and proper sense — as in the text: grace be multiplied. It may be described this way: grace is the implanting of a new and holy principle into the heart, by which the heart is transformed from what it was and made after God's own heart. Grace does not merely produce a moral change but a sacred one. It orients the soul toward heaven and stamps upon it the image and mark of God.

The author and source of grace is the Spirit of God, who is therefore called "the Spirit of grace" (Zechariah 12:10). The Spirit is the fountain from which clear streams of grace flow. As Clement of Alexandria observes, man is like God's harp or tambourine — the harp will not sound unless touched by the player's finger. So

the heart of a person cannot produce any gracious harmony until it is first touched by the finger of God's Spirit. This blessed Spirit works grace in the soul in two ways: universally and progressively.

Universally (1 Thessalonians 5:23): "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely." The Spirit of God infuses grace into all the faculties of the soul. Though grace is worked only in part, it works in every part — light in the understanding, tenderness in the conscience, willing consent in the will, and harmony in the affections. This is why grace is compared to leaven (Matthew 13:33) — it works its way through the whole soul and raises a person's whole manner of life toward heaven.

The Spirit of God also works grace progressively, carrying it forward from one degree to the next. The Pelagians hold that the beginning of grace is from God but the progress of grace comes from ourselves — so God begins the work of faith and we complete it; God lays the first stone and we build the rest. But the Spirit's continual influence is needed to carry the work of grace forward in our hearts. If God were to withdraw His Spirit from even the most holy of men, their grace might fail and collapse. When the sun withdraws its light even a little, darkness fills the air. We need not only the established habit of grace but the Spirit's ongoing help, awakening, and guidance. A ship needs not only sails but wind to move. We need not only the sails of our own effort and ability but the wind of the Spirit to carry us into the heavenly harbor.

Why is the work of holiness in the heart called grace?

Because it is far above nature — it is a flower that does not grow in nature's garden. It comes from a divine source (James 3:17). By reason we live as human beings. By grace we live the life

of God.

It is called grace because it is entirely a work of free grace. Every link in the golden chain of our salvation is forged and adorned by free grace. That one person should be sanctified and not another — this is grace. That God should pass over many of the noble, wealthy, and learned, and graft His heavenly gifts onto a more rough and unpolished nature, on weaker abilities — this rightly deserves to be called grace.

But why is grace not given to everyone?

We must hold with Zanchi that there is always a just reason in God's will — even when it is not fully visible to us. But specifically, I answer as follows.

God gives grace to one person and withholds it from another to demonstrate His sovereign right. God is not obligated to give grace to all (Romans 9:15): "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy." Imagine two criminals brought before the king — he pardons one but not the other. If anyone demands a reason, the king answers: it is my royal prerogative. In the same way, God gives grace to one and not to another. He makes one a vessel of mercy and another a vessel of wrath — this is His sovereign right. The apostle has put all disputes of this kind to rest (Romans 9:20-21): "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God? Does not the potter have a right over the clay?" If we could imagine a plant complaining — why was I not made a bird? Or an animal asking — why wasn't I given reason? — it would be just as absurd as when sinful humanity argues with God: why do I not have grace as well as another? Do not dispute with sovereign prerogative. Let the clay not argue with the potter.

God may also justly withhold His grace from any wicked person for two reasons.

First, because that person once had grace and threw it away. If a father gives his son money to start a business and the son goes bankrupt, the father is not obligated to set him up again. God gave Adam a store of grace to begin the human race with. Adam squandered it and made all his children bankrupt. God is not bound to give it back again.

Second, God may justly withhold His grace from any wicked person because that person is a despiser of grace — he tramples this pearl underfoot (Proverbs 1:7). Is God obligated to give grace to those who despise it? If a king's pardon is refused once, he is not bound to offer it again.

The necessity of grace: it is absolutely essential because it makes us fit for fellowship with God (2 Corinthians 6:14): "What fellowship has light with darkness?" God can no more hold fellowship with a graceless soul than a king can converse with a pig. It is grace that keeps us in constant communication with heaven.

Let me urge everyone who has a soul to save to pursue grace with the greatest earnestness. This is the one thing necessary. Grace will be priceless at the hour of death — and it is just as valuable now, and even more appropriate to seek now (Proverbs 4:7): "With all your acquiring, acquire understanding." When Alexander was presented with the fine jewel-cabinet of King Darius, he reserved it to hold Homer's works, regarding them as most precious. The heart is a spiritual cabinet in which the jewel of grace should be placed. We should desire grace above everything else — above the gifts of the Spirit, yes, even above the comforts of the Spirit.

Comfort is sweet, but grace is better than comfort. Bread is better than honey. We may reach heaven without comfort, but not without grace. It is grace that makes us blessed in life and in death. I will show you twelve remarkable qualities of grace — I will set this beautiful gift before you, hoping that you will be moved to love it.

Excellence 1: Grace has a soul-enlivening quality (Hebrews 10:38): "The righteous will live by faith." People without grace are spiritually dead. They breathe, but they lack life. They are walking ghosts (Ephesians 2:1). The life of sin is the death of the soul. A sinner shows all the signs of death — no pulse, no sensation (Ephesians 4:19). Dead things have no beauty. There is no beauty in a dead flower. Dead things cannot receive what belongs to the living — a dead heir cannot be crowned. But grace is the vital artery of the soul. It does not merely illuminate — it animates. This is why it is called "the light of life" (John 8:12). Believers are said to have their grave-clothes removed and to be alive from the dead (Romans 6:13). Through grace the soul is grafted into Christ the true vine (John 15:5) and is made not only living but full of life (1 Peter 1:3). Grace releases a divine energy into the soul.

Excellence 2: Grace has a soul-enriching quality (1 Corinthians 1:5): "You have been enriched in all knowledge." Just as the sun enriches the world with its golden rays, so knowledge illuminates and enriches the mind. Faith is an enriching grace (James 2:5): "rich in faith." Faith brings Christ's riches into the soul and gives a claim to the promises. The promises are full of heavenly riches — justification, adoption, glory. Faith is the key that opens this treasury of promises and pours their wealth into the soul. The riches of grace surpass all other riches. "Her profit is better than the profit of silver" (Proverbs 3:14).

These riches make a person wise. Wisdom is the most valuable possession of all — and other riches cannot produce it. A person may have a full purse and an empty mind. Many a wealthy heir, though he lives to come of age, never comes to good judgment. But the riches of grace make a person truly wise (Psalm 111:10): "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The saints are compared to wise virgins (Matthew 25). Grace makes a person wise enough to recognize Satan's schemes and strategies (2 Corinthians 2:11), and wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). Grace gives the serpent's discernment in the dove's innocence.

These spiritual riches also sanctify earthly riches. Riches without grace are harmful — they are not wealth but traps. They fan the flames of pride and fuel sinful desires. They are blessings that carry a curse. But grace sanctifies our earthly wealth, neutralizes the poison, removes the curse, and makes our resources genuinely beneficial. Earthly riches become tokens of God's love and wings that lift us toward paradise. So grace, by a divine alchemy, extracts heaven from earth and gives us not only the feast but the blessing.

Grace satisfies the soul — other riches cannot (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Riches can no more fill the heart than a triangle can fill a circle. But grace fills every gap and empty place in the soul. It expands the heart and fills the affections with joy (Romans 15:13) — which joy, as Chrysostom says, is a foretaste of heaven.

Excellence 3: Grace has a soul-adorning quality. It gives beauty and radiance to a person (1 Peter 3:3-4): "Your adornment must not be merely external — braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry. But let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God." A person may have fine silverware and jewels, gold

cloth, and tapestry on the walls — these adorn the house, not the person. The true glory of a person is grace (Proverbs 4:9): "She will present you with a garland of grace." The graces are a chain of pearls adorning Christ's bride. The heart inlaid and adorned with grace is like the king's daughter — "all glorious within" (Psalm 45:13). A gracious soul is the image of God, artfully drawn by the pen of the Holy Spirit. A heart made beautiful by grace is the joy of angels (Luke 15:7) and is God's earthly dwelling place (Isaiah 57:15; Ephesians 3:17). Reason exceeds the senses, but grace exceeds reason by far more. Grace transforms corruption into wholeness. Grace is the soul's finest complexion — it makes the soul like God. Grace is the flower of delight that Christ loves to breathe in. Grace is to the soul what the eye is to the body, what the sun is to the world, what the diamond is to the ring. A soul adorned with grace is like a dove covered with silver wings and golden feathers.

Excellence 4: Grace has a soul-cleansing quality. By nature we are defiled. Sin is a polluting thing — it corrupts everything it touches (2 Corinthians 7:1). A sinner's heart is so dark that only hell could fully match it. But grace is the spiritual cleansing bath — this is why it is called "the washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5). The grace of repentance cleanses. Mary's tears washed Christ's feet — and as they did so, they washed her heart. Faith has a cleansing power (Acts 15:9): "cleansing their hearts by faith." Grace makes the soul white. It removes what seemed fixed and permanent, transforming darkness into something beautiful. Grace is of a heavenly nature. Though it does not completely remove sin, it brings sin under control. Though it does not keep sin out entirely,

it keeps sin from ruling. Though sin in a gracious soul does not die completely, it dies daily. Grace makes the heart a spiritual temple, with this inscription over the door: holiness to the Lord.

Excellence 5: Grace has a soul-strengthening quality. It enables a person to do what is beyond the power of human nature. Grace teaches us to put sin to death, to love our enemies, and to value the glory of Christ above our own lives. So the three young men, empowered by grace, walked calmly into the face of death — neither the sound of the music could lure them nor the heat of the furnace frighten them (Daniel 3:17). Grace is a Christian's tested armor that does what no other armor can — it does not merely protect him but puts courage into him. Tertullian calls Athanasius an unconquerable diamond. Grace makes a Christian not only endure suffering but boast in it (Romans 5:3). A soul fortified and energized by grace can tread on the lion and the serpent (Psalm 91:13) and like Leviathan can laugh at the shaking of a spear (Job 41:29). So grace instills a heroic spirit and draws strength into a person, enabling him to act far above what human nature is capable of.

Excellence 6: Grace has a soul-lifting quality. It is a divine spark that rises. When the heart is touched by the Spirit like a magnet, it is drawn upward to God (Proverbs 15:24): "The way of life for the wise goes upward." Grace raises a person above others. He lives at a higher elevation while others crawl along the ground. A Christian, on the wings of grace, soars upward. The saints mount up like eagles (Isaiah 40:31). A believer is a citizen of heaven. He conducts his most important business there by faith. Grace shoots the heart above the world (Psalm 139:17; Philippians 3). Grace gives us likeness to Christ and fellowship with Christ (1 John 1:3):

"Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." A person full of grace has Christ in his heart and the world under his feet. Grace humbles — yet it also elevates.

Excellence 7: Grace has a sweet-smelling quality. It makes us a fragrant offering to God. This is why grace is compared to the most fragrant spices — myrrh, cinnamon, and frankincense (Song of Solomon 4:13). There are two ways that grace sends out this fragrance.

Grace perfumes our names (Hebrews 11:2): "By faith the men of old gained approval." Grace was the spice that preserved and perfumed their reputations. How renowned was Abraham for his faith, Moses for his meekness, Phinehas for his zeal? What a fresh and sweet fragrance their names still carry today! Even the wicked cannot help but sense something majestic in the graces of the saints. Though they mock grace with their tongues, they inwardly reverence it. Grace is aromatic — it embalms a person's name. A gracious person, when he dies, carries a good conscience with him and leaves a good reputation behind.

Grace also perfumes our acts of worship (Psalm 141:2): "May my prayer be counted as incense before You." Noah's sacrifice was a pleasing fragrance (Genesis 8:21): "The Lord smelled the soothing aroma." The prayers of a wicked man are like foul breath. His solemn offerings are like dung (Malachi 2:3). The stench rising from a sinner's religious duties is so foul that God will not come near (Amos 5:21): "I will not smell your solemn assemblies." But grace gives fragrance and sweetness to our holy acts (Hebrews 11:4): "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which God testified about his gifts." Abel's sacrifice had a sweeter aroma — God smelled it with favor. Jerome says God lit

Abel's sacrifice with fire from heaven, confirming His acceptance of the offering. Since grace so perfumes you, wear this flower not in your collar but in your heart.

Excellence 8: Grace has a soul-ennobling quality. It elevates a person — raising him above princes and nobles. Theodosius considered it greater dignity to be a servant of Christ, wearing the livery adorned with the silver graces of the Spirit, than to be great and celebrated in the world (Isaiah 43:4): "You were precious in My sight; you were honored." Sin degrades a person. Christ tells wicked people plainly who they are related to (John 8:44): "You are of your father the devil." The Hebrew word for "worthless" means to be held in the lightest possible regard. There is nothing too low for an ungracious man to do — he is pliable to anything, like wire that bends in any direction. But grace ennoble. The person born of God (1 John 3:1) lives in a way consistent with that new birth, hating everything that is base or unworthy. The saints are called kings and priests for their dignity (Revelation 1:6) and jewels for their value (Malachi 3:17).

Excellence 9: Grace has a soul-securing quality — it brings safety. Everyone wants to be safe in dangerous times. If war or plague comes, if death peers through your window, who would not want to be secure? Nothing will keep you safe in times of danger like grace. Grace is the best protection. It places Christians beyond the reach of damnation and frees them from the power of hell. Proverbs 10:2: "Righteousness delivers from death." Do righteous people not also die? Yes — but righteousness delivers from the sting of the first death and from all fear of the second. One man said: I am not afraid to die — only to be damned. But here is a believer's comfort: the fire of God's wrath can never touch him.

Grace is God's own image stamped on the soul — and He will not destroy His own image. When Xerxes the Persian destroyed all the temples in Greece, he ordered the temple of Diana to be spared because of its beautiful structure. In the same way, the soul that has the beauty of holiness shining in it will be preserved for the glory of its construction — God will not allow His own temple to be demolished. Do you want safety in evil times? Obtain grace and strengthen this garrison. A good conscience is a Christian's royal fortress. David's enemies surrounded him on all sides — yet he said: "I lay down and slept" (Psalm 3:5). A good conscience can sleep in the mouth of a cannon. Grace is a Christian's chainmail that is not pierced by arrow or bullet. True grace may be shot at, but it can never be shot through. Grace places the soul in Christ — and there it is safe, like a bee in the hive or a dove in the ark. Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Excellence 10: Grace has a heart-steadying quality (Hebrews 13:9): "It is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace." Before grace is infused, the heart is like a ship without ballast — it rocks and shifts, on the verge of capsizing. This is why the person without grace is called double-minded (James 1:8) — of one mind today, another tomorrow. Hearts not sanctified by grace will be unsettled. They will turn whichever way the wind blows — following not what is best but what is safest. They align with whatever religion has the sword behind it rather than the Word in front of it. Seneca calls this a mind that rolls about endlessly and settles nowhere.

But grace fixes and steadies the heart (Psalm 57:7): "My heart is steadfast, O God." Hypocrites are like meteors in the sky — briefly bright and then gone. David was a fixed star. Grace keeps the heart upright. The more sincere a person is, the more steadfast he is. Grace draws the heart toward God as a center, and there it finds rest. A gracious heart clings to God — and whatever changes come, the soul remains settled like a ship at anchor.

Excellence 11: Grace has a preparatory quality — it readies and equips us for glory. Glory is the highest summit of human happiness, exceeding all our thoughts. No words can exaggerate it. Grace tunes and prepares the soul for glory (2 Peter 1:3): He "called us to His own glory and excellence" — virtue leads to glory. First you clean the vessel, then you pour in the wine. God first cleanses us by His grace, then pours in the wine of glory. The silver link of grace draws the golden link of glory after it. Grace is glory in the bud; glory is grace in full bloom. In short, glory is nothing other than grace having come to full maturity.

Excellence 12: Grace has a lasting quality. Earthly things are for a season, but grace has eternity stamped on it — it is called "enduring riches" (Proverbs 8:18). Other riches grow wings and fly away from us. Grace grows wings and flies with us to heaven. A counterfeit grace may be lost, like a blazing comet that burns itself out. True saving grace may weaken and go through periods of eclipse. But still there is sap in the vine, and "the seed of God remains" (1 John 3:9). Grace is a blossom of eternity — called "the anointing that abides" (1 John 2:27). Grace is compared to "rivers of living water" (John 7:38). This river can never run dry, because the Spirit of God is the spring that feeds it. God settles grace on the

saints as an inheritance, and He guarantees that the title will never be broken. The person who has true grace can no more fall away than the angels can — who are fixed stars in their heavenly orbits.

The reasons to believe that grace is permanent are:

God's election (Romans 8:29-30): "Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined." Predestination is the great guarantee of the saints' preservation. God chooses His people to faith as surely as He chooses them to salvation (2 Thessalonians 2:13). What could possibly undo God's election?

The power of God (1 Peter 1:5): "We are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed." The graces of the saints may in themselves be as fragile as glass — but these fragile things held in the hand of God will never break.

God's solemn commitment: the Lord has put this in writing and sealed it, pledging His word for the saints' perseverance (Jeremiah 32:40): "I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me." A believer's charter is confirmed under heaven's own seal. If grace were not to last into eternity, it would be because God either lacked the power to carry out what He decreed or the faithfulness to fulfill what He promised — and to claim either would be blasphemy.

Jesus Christ our great high priest appears in the heavenly court. As He poured out blood on the cross, so He pours out prayers in heaven for the saints' perseverance (Hebrews 7:25): "He always lives to make intercession for them." Christ is not only a priest but a Son — and therefore certain to be heard. What Christ

asks for as man, He has the power to grant as God (John 17:24): "Father, I desire" — there He prays as man; "I desire" — there He speaks with the authority of God.

So grace is something that endures. Christians, you may lose your friends, your wealth, your very lives — but you will never lose your grace. Those who teach that a believer can fall away from grace would put believers under Cain's mark — living in constant shaking and dread. They would drain a Christian's deepest comfort and break a link in the very chain of salvation.

Let us test whether our grace is genuine. There is something that looks like grace but is not. Chrysostom says the devil has a counterfeit version of every grace. Jewelers have ways of testing precious stones. Let us test our grace against the touchstone of Scripture — the person who has only a painted grace will receive only a painted paradise.

True grace shows itself through a deep dislike and opposition to sin (Psalm 119:104): "I hate every false way." Grace sets itself against the characteristic sins of each person's nature (Psalm 18:23) and against the sins that are most fashionable in the age (Revelation 2:2).

Grace is also known by its growth — and growth is evidence of life. Dead things do not grow. A painting does not grow. A hypocrite, who is only a picture of religion, does not grow. A genuine Christian grows in love for Christ, in humility, and in good works (Psalm 92:12; Hosea 14:5): "He will flourish like the lily and he will take root like the cedars of Lebanon." When the Spirit of God falls like dew upon the soul, He causes grace to bloom and reach toward full growth.

True grace will make us willing to suffer for Christ. Grace is like gold — it endures the fiery trial (1 Peter 1:7). And if upon careful self-examination we find that we truly have "the grace of God in truth" (Colossians 1:6), this will be our comfort in the hour of death. Like Simeon, we may depart in peace — assured that though we cannot prevent death, we will overcome it.

Let me offer two or three directions for obtaining grace.

First, if you want this jewel of grace, you must work for it. We are told to seek for wisdom as one searches for a vein of gold (Proverbs 2:2-3). Our salvation cost Christ blood — it will cost us sweat.

Second, go to God for grace. He is called "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10). We can lose grace on our own, but we cannot find it on our own. A sheep can wander away from the fold, but it cannot find its way back without the shepherd. Go to the God of all grace. God is the first planter, the one who advances grace, and the one who brings it to completion. God is the Father of lights (James 1:17) — He must light this candle of grace in the soul. Grace is in His gift — it is not achieved but received. Go to God in prayer then, and pour out your heart before Him: Lord, I need grace. I need a humble, believing heart — and You are the God of all grace. All my springs are in You. Enrich me with grace. Do not let me die without it. What is gold in the purse if there is no oil in my lamp? Give me that anointing of God. I read in Your Word of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Lord, my heart is barren soil — plant some of these supernatural fruits in me, so that I may be more useful to You. Lord, I cannot be satisfied with anything less. To whom will You give grace, if not to those who ask — and who are resolved not to stop asking?

Third, if you want grace, enlist the prayers of others on your behalf. A merchant who has multiple investments is more likely to prosper. In the same way, the person who has many prayers being offered for him is more likely to grow spiritually. If you had a sick child, you would beg others to pray for him. You have a soul that is sick — sick with pride and lust, sick to death. Beg the prayers of godly friends, that God would heal you with His grace. A Moses or a Jacob can have great power with God. Believers can sometimes prevail not only for themselves but for their friends (James 5:16). A godly person's prayers may do you more good than if he gave you all his earthly inheritance.

Fourth, if you want grace, make regular use of the means of grace. Lie at the pool of Bethesda. Wait at the posts of wisdom's door. Inward grace is worked through outward means. The preaching of the Word is God's instrument for producing grace — it is called "the rod of His strength" (Psalm 110:2) and "the breath of His mouth" (Isaiah 11:4). Through it He causes life to enter. Out of this golden channel of the sanctuary, God pours the golden oil of grace into the soul. The ministry of the Gospel is called "the ministry of the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:8) because the Spirit of God ordinarily uses it to work grace. This ministry is to be valued above even the ministry of angels.

Why is the preached Word the ordinary means of conveying grace — why not private conversation or reading?

Because God has appointed it for this purpose, and He honors His own ordinances (1 Corinthians 1:21). What reason could be given why the waters of Damascus should not have healed Naaman's leprosy as well as the waters of the Jordan? Only this: the Lord appointed and sanctified the Jordan for this work and not

Damascus. Therefore, if we want grace, let us wait where the manna falls — and expect the dew of the Spirit to fall there with it. The power of God accompanies His Word.

How much we should delight in the means of grace! Sleidan says there was a church in France which the Protestants called paradise — as though they felt they were in paradise whenever they entered the house of God. The ordinances that are the power of God for salvation should be our paradise.

THE SPIRITUAL WATCH



Proverbs 4:23 — "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

The book of Proverbs is rich with divine wisdom. Other parts of Scripture are like a golden chain where the verses link together in connected argument — but this book is like a heap of gold rings, with many precious sayings scattered throughout like individual jewels or sparkling diamonds. Solomon was the wisest of kings. As his kingdom was a picture of the world's glory, his mind was a treasury of the world's wisdom. He was endowed with the divine Spirit, and as he wrote, the Holy Spirit guided his pen. Surely among all his golden sayings, none is more weighty than this: watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. The text is about matters of life and death. I will first explain it, then apply it.

"Keep" or "watch over": the Hebrew word has several meanings.

Sometimes it means to arm or protect. A blow to the heart kills — protect your heart.

Sometimes it means to take care of something so it is not lost — as one would guard a piece of silver to keep it from being stolen.

Sometimes it means to hold something in safe custody. So keep your heart — lock it up safely so that it is available when God calls for it.

"Your heart": heart is used in various ways in Scripture — sometimes for the physical organ of life (Judges 19:5), sometimes for the soul (Deuteronomy 13:3), sometimes for the mind (Proverbs 10:8), sometimes for the conscience (1 John 3:20), sometimes for the will and affections (Psalm 119:36). I take it here in its fullest sense — the whole soul with all its noble faculties. This is the deposit entrusted to every person — the heart.

"With all diligence": the original reads with all keeping. The Hebrew implies keeping with vigilant watch and guard — a Christian is to set a continual guard around his heart. Some translate it: keep your heart above all keeping. Nothing requires such careful custody. A Christian's heart must always be under his own watchful eye.

"For from it flow the springs of life": just as the heart is the fountain of physical life — if the heart beats, the body lives; if the heart is struck fatally, death follows — so the soul is a spiritual fountain. From this spring-head flow the streams that lead either to salvation or damnation.

In the text there are:

A duty: keep your heart.

The manner: with all diligence.

The reason: for from it flow the springs of life.

Doctrine: a Christian's great responsibility is to guard his heart with all keeping. We are to keep our eyes — Job placed a watch there (Job 31:1): "I have made a covenant with my eyes." We are to keep our lips — David put a bridle on his tongue (Psalm 39:1): "I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle." But most of all we are to watch over our hearts: keep your heart with all diligence. The heart, like Dinah, will wander out — and rarely returns home without being defiled. A pagan philosopher once said: I never come home with as good desires as I had when I went out. A serpent, when danger is near, protects its head — and to save its head it will expose its whole body to harm. So a wise Christian should above all things protect his heart. He should risk his skin rather than allow a wound to reach his heart. I will show that the heart must be kept: first, in all kinds of ways; second, at all times; third, with reasons to motivate us.

The heart must be kept in all kinds of ways.

Keep your heart as you would keep a temple. The temple was a holy place set apart for God's worship. So the heart is the most sacred of God's temples (1 Corinthians 3:16). This heart-temple must be kept pure and holy. No filth should lie here. Sweep the dust out of the temple. The vessels of the temple were cleansed (2 Chronicles 29:15). In the same way, the memory, affections, and conscience — these vessels of the heart-temple — must be cleansed (2 Corinthians 7:1). Christ drove the buyers and sellers out of the temple (John 2). The cares of the world will try to crowd into your heart — take a whip made of the warnings of God's law and drive these money-changers out of your heart's temple. Do not let God's temple become a marketplace. The temple had fire burning on the altar — watch out for strange fire. Keep the fire of zeal and devo-

tion burning on the altar of your heart. Do the work of the temple: offer up the sacrifice of a broken heart. When the heart is consecrated as a holy of holies, God will walk there. Many a person's heart is a house of disease and confusion — polluted with sin. This is to put pigs in God's room; it is to let the devil into God's temple. David's heart was a dedicated temple (Psalm 119:38).

Keep your heart as you would keep a treasure. A person with a great treasure locks and bolts it securely to prevent theft. Christian, you carry a precious treasure with you — a heart. The devil and the world want to steal this jewel from you. Guard your heart as you would guard your life. Few people know the value of their own hearts — which is why they choose other things above it. Keep your heart as a treasure.

Keep your heart as you would keep a garden. Your heart is a garden — weed sin out of it. Among the flowers of the Spirit, weeds will grow: the weeds of pride, malice, and greed — these grow without being planted. Therefore weed your heart every day through prayer, self-examination, and repentance.

Weeds crowd out the useful plants and flowers. The weeds of corruption crowd out the growth of grace. Where the weed of unbelief grows, it prevents the flower of faith from growing.

Weeds ruin the garden walks. Christ will not walk in a heart overgrown with weeds and briars. Christ was sometimes found among the lilies (Song of Solomon 6:3) — never among the thistles. Poor sinner, you complain that you have no fellowship with God. There was a time when God made Himself known to you, but now He seems distant. Here is the reason: sin has destroyed the

walk. Your heart has become like the field of the sluggard (Proverbs 24:30). Weed your heart daily. Do not let your heart become a thicket for Satan.

Keep your heart as you would keep a fortress. The human heart is a garrison — a royal fort — and it is under siege. The devil fires his flaming arrows of temptation at it. Guard your heart like a tower or castle.

Keep a constant watch within your heart (Habakkuk 2:1): "I will stand at my guard post and station myself on the rampart." Identify where Satan is working hardest to breach the wall — which place he is most aggressively attacking — and set a double guard there and reinforce it.

Use all your spiritual weapons — meditation and prayer. Prayer is the great cannon. Fire it — and be sure to load it with the bullet of faith (Matthew 21:22; 1 Peter 5:9). If the devil takes the garrison by force, the damage will be severe. It is far easier to let Satan in than to get him out. If the devil takes the fortress of your heart, you are his slave — and remember, he gives no mercy.

Keep your heart as you would keep a prisoner under guard. The heart is guilty and is always looking for a chance to escape — we must put bolts and chains on it. A prisoner in jail may give you his word that he will not run, but when he sees an opportunity and you stop watching, he will file off his chains and be gone. So the heart promises it will avoid certain sins — but if you are not vigilant, it will slip away into vanity. Say to your heart what John the Baptist said to Herod (Mark 6:18): "It is not lawful for you to have

your brother's wife." Say to your heart: it is not lawful for you to touch the forbidden fruit. Lay the commands of God across your heart. Keep it under close guard.

Keep your heart as you would keep a timepiece. The heart will naturally wind down toward earthly things — so wind it back up every morning and evening through prayer. A watch runs unevenly — sometimes fast, sometimes slow. So set this spiritual watch by the sundial of God's Word.

The heart must also be kept at all times.

Keep your heart when you are alone. It was Satan's strategy to approach Eve when she was alone and less able to resist. He is like a cunning suitor who courts the daughter when her parents are away. The devil breaks through the fence at its weakest point. Solitude and quiet time are good things. If a Christian had a well-ordered heart, what sweet thoughts about God he might have when alone! But because of the corruption within us, how many vain, proud, and impure thoughts will steal into our hearts in the moments when we are most cut off from the world! The birds of prey will come at the sacrifice. The devil will shoot in his flaming arrows, and when we least suspect him, he will work to make us surrender the fortress of our heart to him.

Keep your heart when you are with others. Bad company is the bait Satan uses to angle for the heart. Under the law, a person who touched a dead body became unclean (Numbers 5:2). In the same way, the heart is easily defiled by spending time among those who are spiritually dead in sin. It is easy to catch a disease from those you spend time with. Since the fall, our hearts are ready to corrupt and infect one another — like the withered vine the poet describes,

which drew the color and sap from its healthy neighboring vine. If you mix bright metal with rusty metal, the rusty will not become bright — the bright will become rusty. So an evil companion rusted with sin rubs some of his ungodly rust on a person who has been brightened by grace. Christians, even guard your hearts in good company. Even people who have some genuine faith in them may carry much lightness in their conversation. If no filth rises, there may still be froth — and this is more dangerous precisely because it is less suspected. Who would suspect the plague hidden in perfumed linen? The devil sometimes does more harm through a good instrument than through a bad one. He sends temptation through someone close to us — he tempted Christ through an apostle. The devil once crept into a serpent; here he crept into a dove. But Christ recognized his footprint (Matthew 16:23): "Get behind Me, Satan." How watchful we need to be even in company!

Guard your heart especially after times of spiritual duty. When Christ had been praying and fasting, that is when the devil came to tempt Him (Matthew 4:2-3). After we have been most fully engaged in worship, Satan will tempt us toward pride and spiritual overconfidence. Many Christians' hearts, like bows, go slack after they have been drawn — they tend to relax, as though doing a religious duty were a reliable shield against all temptation. Do we not know that Satan is always watching for an opening? He is more furious against us after worship. The very prayers that satisfy God enrage Satan. And if we lay down our guard, he will strike and wound us. After David's victory over the Assyrians, he grew complacent and committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:4). After we have won a victory over Satan in worship, we must be most afraid that our hearts will betray us. When God drove Adam

out of the garden, He placed a flaming sword at the east to guard the tree of life (Genesis 3). When we have driven out the devil through prayer and fasting, let us post a strong guard around our hearts so the enemy does not find his way back in.

Guard your heart in times of hardship. The devil makes use of every wind to toss the soul and bring about spiritual shipwreck. Hardship has its own unique temptations. More souls have been lost in a storm than ships. In adversity, the devil tempts toward despair and unbelief. Satan used Job's wife as a ladder to try to scale the impregnable tower of Job's faith (Job 2:9): "Do you still hold fast your integrity?" It was a cutting remark — as if the devil were saying: God has taken down your fence, He has struck you through your children — and you are so senseless that you still serve and worship Him? What has His service gotten you? What do you have to show for it but your sores? Throw off religion, curse God, and die. Satan's medicine always poisons (Malachi 3:14): "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What profit is it that we have kept His charge?' We have mourned and fasted, and have almost fasted away everything — we will fast no longer." When a person's resources are low and his spirit is troubled, Satan begins to cast his line. Very often Satan uses poverty to push a person toward dishonest means. Agur feared what poverty would do to his heart (Proverbs 30:8-9). Guard your heart in adversity. Beware of reaching for the forbidden fruit.

Guard your heart in times of prosperity. The fuller the moon is, the further it is from the sun — and often, the fuller a person is of worldly success, the further his heart drifts from God. Deuteronomy 32:15: "Jeshurun grew fat and kicked." It is hard to thrive in prosperity without also growing in sin. A full cup is hard

to carry without spilling. Trees are never more vulnerable to the wind than when they are in full bloom. Pride, idleness, and self-indulgence are the three children that prosperity tends to produce. Samson fell asleep in Delilah's lap — and millions, cradled in the lap of prosperity, have slept the sleep of death. Agur prayed: "Give me not riches" (Proverbs 30:8). He knew his heart would be ready to run wild. The world's golden prize bewitches. When God sets a hedge of prosperity around us, we need to set a hedge of caution and self-awareness around our hearts.

Why must we be so careful about guarding our hearts? Here are the reasons.

The heart is a slippery thing (Jeremiah 17:9): "The heart is deceitful above all things." In the Hebrew it reads — the heart is a Jacob above all things — the heart is a supplanter. If we are not watchful, our hearts will deceive us. There is deceit in coins, in friends, in books — but the heart has a talent for deception that surpasses all of them. It is a skilled impostor. The way of the heart is like a snake moving silently across a rock. Consider the twists and turns, the hidden layers, and the dark corridors of a self-deceiving heart! Let us trace its tricks and schemes — and see whether there is good reason to stand guard over it continually. The heart will deceive us about things that are sinful, things that are lawful, and things that are religious.

The heart will deceive us about sinful things.

The heart will tell us that a sin is small — and that because it is small, it can be excused.

The heart will make excuses for sin, dressing up bad choices with seemingly good reasons.

The heart will tell a person he can hold on to his sin and still hold on to his religion (2 Kings 17:33): "They feared the Lord and served their own gods." The heart quietly suggests that as long as a person goes to church and gives to charity, he can secretly give in to his pet sin — as though doing religious duties gives him a license to sin.

The heart will even quote Scripture to justify sin (1 Corinthians 9:20, 22): "To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews." What a crafty heart — one that can find Scripture to use against itself! Paul was willing to adapt his approach in matters of personal preference in order to win souls, but he would never violate God's law or deny an article of his faith. If the heart is this treacherous — always more ready to excuse sin than to examine it — how much care and caution we need to exercise!

The heart will deceive us about lawful things in two ways.

It is right to protect your reputation — a good name is a precious thing. But under the cover of protecting one's name, the heart is quick to lead a person into self-seeking (John 12:43): "They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God."

It is right to find joy in family and possessions (Deuteronomy 26:11). But the heart is prone to go too far. How often are a spouse and children placed in God's rightful place — with the full current of affection rushing toward people and almost no love left for Christ. This is the heart's deception — it leads us to sin most in the area of lawful things. More people are killed by wine than by poison. When we go too far, we ruin ourselves.

The heart will deceive us about religious things.

1. Our duties. 2. Our graces.

Our duties. The heart will tell us it is enough to attend the preaching of the Word and take the Lord's Supper, even if our affections are never moved at all — like the salamander, which lives in fire but (as naturalists say) is never the warmer for it. Will this be any defense before God — to tell Him how many sermons you have heard? It will be like delivering Uriah's letter: it will be evidence against you. How subtle the heart is — plotting its own destruction and leading a person to hell by way of religious duty!

Our graces. The heart acts like a flattering mirror that makes a hypocrite look righteous. The foolish virgins thought they had oil. Many people are firmly convinced they have grace, but they have none. The hypocrite's knowledge is no better than ignorance (1 John 2:4). He has received light but has not been transformed — he has not been made like Christ. The hypocrite's faith is mere wishful thinking. He believes, but his heart is not purified. He claims to trust God in the big things but won't trust Him in the small ones — willing to trust God with his soul, but not with his money.

Since the heart is this deceitful, how urgently we need to guard it with all diligence! Treat the heart as you would treat a known cheat. You would not trust a cheat out of your sight. The heart is a master cheat — it will undermine and swindle you. Test your heart, but do not trust it (Proverbs 28:26): "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool."

We must guard the heart with constant watchfulness, because it is not only deceptive but unstable. God complained of Israel that their goodness was like the morning dew (Hosea 6:4) — the sun rises and the dew vanishes. The heart sometimes seems to be in a good state, but it quickly changes. Set water on the fire and it boils;

leave it outside in the cold and it freezes. The good affections that boil up in church often freeze over in the shop. One day a Christian is alert and fervent in prayer; the next day he is like the disciples — heavy and falling asleep (Luke 22:45). One day a Christian is like David dancing before the ark with all his might (2 Samuel 6:14); another day he is like Samson after his hair was cut — his strength gone from him (Judges 16:19). When gold is purified in fire, it stays pure. But it is not so with the heart. After being purified in worship, it does not stay pure — it collects new grime and impurity. The heart is humble one day, proud the next; gentle one day, angry the next. It is like a sick person's pulse, which changes almost every fifteen minutes. Because the heart is so variable and unstable, we must guard it constantly. Like a stringed instrument, the heart quickly goes out of tune — so we must regularly tighten the strings, that we may make melody in our hearts to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).

The heart must especially be watched because it is the source of everything we do and think. The heart either sweetens or poisons all of our actions. The heart is the spring that makes the river of our lives run either clear or muddy. It is the throne of either sin or grace. If the root is bitter, no sweet fruit can grow from it. In the same way, if there is a root of bitterness in the heart, our service to God cannot be pleasing. Just as the physical heart is the source of life — if the heart beats, the body lives; if the heart is diseased and failing, the body dies — so it is spiritually. If the inner person is holy, then thoughts and actions are holy. In religion, the heart is everything. We judge people's hearts by their actions, but God judges people's actions by their hearts. Amaziah did what was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a fully devoted heart (2

Chronicles 25:2). But of Asa it is written, his heart was wholly devoted all his days (2 Chronicles 15:17). It is the heart that determines the character of everything we do. Since the heart is the spring that makes our actions good or bad, the heart must above all things be watched. Keep the spring pure — guard your heart with all diligence.

Application 1. This shows the difference between the godly and the wicked. The hypocrite focuses mainly on outward behavior — he keeps his actions from obvious failure and puts a watch over his lips. The godly person puts a watch over his heart. His main work happens within. He notices the first stirrings and upwellings of sin and grieves over them. He works to set his heart right. The heart is the altar that makes the offering holy.

Application 2. Reproof. If we are to guard our hearts with all diligence, then this rebukes four kinds of people.

First, those who have no concern for their hearts at all. They will take care to protect their property from debt, but no care to protect their hearts. Salvation depends on guarding the heart — yet how few people think about their hearts. They simply let the devil walk right in. The shepherd watches over his flock, the doctor protects his prescriptions, the lawyer guards his documents, the merchant looks after his goods, the greedy man holds tightly to his gold — but few guard their hearts.

Why do people not guard their hearts?

Because they do not understand how precious the heart is. What a treasure the heart is — divinely ennobled, capable of sharing in God's glory. But few know the value of this jewel.

People fail to guard their hearts because they are too busy guarding other things (Song of Solomon 1:6): "My own vineyard I have not kept." Many a person could honestly say: I have been consumed by the world — managing my estate, feeding my desires — but my own heart has been neglected. My own vineyard I have not kept. Judas was watching the money bag when he should have been watching his heart.

People fail to guard their hearts because they are simply lazy. Guarding the heart takes effort, and few are willing to go to the trouble. But should a merchant stop keeping his account books just because he finds it tedious?

Some think their hearts are already so good that they don't need to bother watching over them. Many a bold sinner is overconfidently certain of heaven — assuming he lacks nothing but the moment of arrival. So he never examines his heart or checks his standing before God until it is too late.

Second, this rebukes those who, when they should be guarding their hearts, fall asleep (Matthew 13:25): "While men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares." While people sleep and neglect their spiritual watch, the devil comes and plants poisonous seeds in their hearts — seeds of malice, pride, and lust. It is said that while a dragon sleeps, a jewel can be taken from its head. In the same way, the devil steals the jewel of the heart while people sleep in spiritual complacency. For a soldier, falling asleep on guard duty is a fatal offense.

Third, this rebukes those who, rather than guarding their hearts, have allowed them to be stolen. The love of the world has stolen men's hearts. We could put out an urgent call searching for

lost hearts. Satan catches men's hearts with a golden lure. This is why preaching the Word does so little good in many cases — ministers preach to people's ears, but the world has already stolen away their hearts.

Fourth, this rebukes those who guard half their heart but not all of it — those who have sincere affection for good things, but leave some rooms of their heart open to sin. Herod did many things right, but he left one room of his heart for the devil — he lived in incest. The true mother in Solomon's story would not have the child divided. God will not accept a divided heart — He wants the whole heart kept for Him.

Application 3. This calls Christians to guard their hearts. Merchants grieve over losses at sea — but whatever else we lose, if we keep our hearts, we will be well enough. Guard your heart with all diligence. I admit this is hard work. Elijah found it easier to shut up the sky through prayer than to shut his heart against evil thoughts. But this is the work every true Christian must set himself to — the keeping of his heart.

But if my heart is evil, should I still keep it?

No — throw away the evil in it, and keep what is good. When we preserve fruit in sugar, we peel the skin, cut out the core and rotten parts, and keep what is best. Do the same with your heart. What is evil in it, cast away. What is good, preserve. If your heart is hard, get rid of the stone — keep it soft. If it is hypocritical, cut out the rotten part and keep what is sound. Separate the precious from the worthless. Throw away the sin in your heart; keep and nurture

the grace. In short, do with your heart what the men in the parable did with the fish (Matthew 13:48): "They gathered the good into containers, but threw the bad away."

This is the great call — guard your heart. Sinners, pay attention to your hearts. Do not let your hearts be charmed and stolen away by the pleasures of the world (Hosea 4:11): "Harlotry, wine, and new wine take away the heart." Many have drowned their hearts in wine. Clement of Alexandria describes a certain fish that has no distinct heart separate from its stomach — its heart is in its belly. This is a picture of those who live only for pleasure, whose whole heart is consumed by appetite.

In what holy posture and disposition should I keep my heart?

Keep your heart awake (Song of Solomon 5:2): "My heart was awake" (Psalm 108:2): "I will awaken the dawn." Even if we have been spiritually sluggish, it is high time to wake up (Romans 13:11). Beware of sleeping in ignorance, lack of repentance, and false security. The heart is naturally asleep — sin can be compared to sleep.

A sleeping person's senses are shut down. In the same way, a sinner whose heart is asleep in sin has lost his spiritual senses — he feels neither the weight of sin nor the reality of God's wrath (Ephesians 4:19). He is headed for hell, but doesn't realize it. He is laughing in his sleep.

While the senses are inactive in sleep, the imagination is set free — a sleeping man dreams he is at a feast (Isaiah 29:8). In the same way, when a sinner's heart is asleep in sin, his imagination runs freely. He imagines he is an heir of God's promises, that God loves him — his fantasy is wide awake even while his soul sleeps.

Sleep prevents action. A sleeping man cannot work. In the same way, a sinner who has fallen asleep in sin cannot work out his salvation.

A sleeping person is in danger of being robbed — his money or valuables can be taken. In the same way, while a sinner sleeps, his soul can be stolen from him. Therefore keep your heart awake. Let God's judgments on sinners serve as an alarm to rouse you. Pray David's prayer (Psalm 13:3): "Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death."

Keep your heart watchful and suspicious of itself. Show charity toward others, but be suspicious of yourself. The better the heart is, the more it doubts itself. Satan has agents working from within us — the heart is not reliable on its own, so it needs constant watching and caution. Hazael had no idea what his own heart was capable of (2 Kings 8:13). If someone had come to Noah and said, "Noah, you will soon be drunk," Noah would have been ready to reject the warning with contempt. Every sin exists in seed form within the heart. Where will the heart not run if left unguarded? It will run toward idolatry, atheism, and the worst immorality. Stay suspicious of your heart. Suspicion produces vigilance, and vigilance produces safety. Keep your heart always in your own view. Hold it in check with the restraint of putting sin to death.

Keep your heart serious. Beware of a shallow, flippant heart (Zephaniah 3:11): "Her prophets are reckless." The heart of the wicked is empty, and in this sense is said to be worth little (Proverbs 10:20). Put a feather on a scale and it registers nothing. The heart of a sinner is just as weightless — vanity floats on top and deceit hides underneath. A shallow heart is like a ship without ballast — it tips over easily. A empty heart is unstable. Light things

are blown in every direction. A superficial Christian is not truly broken over sin. Sin rarely weighs heavily on a shallow heart. Keep the heart serious. Fix it on God (Psalm 57:7): "My heart is steadfast, O God." Grace gives the heart substance and keeps it from drifting into carelessness. Anchor your heart with thoughts of judgment and eternity.

Keep your heart humble (1 Peter 5:5). The best posture of heart is one that makes a person fit for God's presence. The humble heart is the valley where God delights to walk, the house where He chooses to dwell (Isaiah 57). The humble heart thinks little of itself and highly of others (Philippians 4:3). The more humble the heart is, the more fruitful in grace. Low-lying meadows are the richest ground. Keep your heart humble. Look honestly at your own weaknesses and other people's strengths. The swelling abscess of pride is deadly. An eagle lifts a tortoise high into the air, then drops it onto a rock and shatters it. In the same way, the devil lifts the heart up in pride — and then destroys it.

Keep your heart lifted toward heaven (Colossians 3:1-2): "Keep seeking the things above." Press your heart down with the weight of humility, but lift it up on the wings of heavenly-mindedness. When the heart is touched by the Spirit like a magnet, it rises upward. This is the holy posture and disposition in which the heart is to be kept.

What means should be used for keeping the heart?

To keep your heart, keep God's Word in your heart (Psalm 119:11): "Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You." The Word is a preservative and an antidote that protects the heart from spiritual infection. What are all the golden

commands in Scripture but prescriptions for keeping the heart in good health? A sailor who wants to keep his ship on course keeps his eye on the stars and the compass. The best way to keep our hearts is to navigate by a Scripture compass.

To keep your heart, be careful about the company you keep. Draw yourself into fellowship with other believers. When God's people are together, they warm and encourage one another. Their counsel is timely and their prayers are a real help. A ship sailing in convoy is far less likely to fall to pirates. Christian, do you want to keep your heart safe on your journey to heaven? Let the fellowship of the saints be your convoy. Avoid spending time with irreligious people — they are spiritually contagious and will poison your heart. Take delight in those who excel in virtue (Psalm 16:3). The saints carry the light of God's Word with them — it is good to walk with those who carry the light.

To keep your heart, watch over your emotions. The heart is prone to being wrecked by its own passions, just as a vessel is overturned by too much sail. The heart sometimes sinks under sorrow, swells with anger, or overflows with carnal delight. Diagoras, upon seeing his three sons crowned victors in a single day, died from the sheer joy. Passion carries us beyond the bounds of reason. It is a kind of madness that takes hold of us. Put a restraint on your passions, or your heart will run wild in sin. Avoid whatever inflames your spirit, just as a person would avoid the wines and strong drinks that overheat his blood. Remove every occasion that might stir up this fury. Take away the fuel that feeds this fire. When this viper of passion begins to warm up, pray it down. Prayer, says Luther, reduces the swelling of the soul and cools the heat of disordered affections. Moses, overcome by anger, spoke rashly with his

lips (Psalm 106:33). A man in a rage is like a ship in a storm with no pilot, no sails, and no oars — exposed to the waves and the rocks. How many people have lost their hearts in just such a storm!

To keep your heart, guard all the entrances to it. A person defending a city guards the forts and outer walls. Guard especially the two main gates of the heart — the eye and the ear.

Guard the eye, for the eye often sets the heart on fire. Job made a covenant with his eyes (Job 31:1). The ancient serpent, the devil, creeps through the window of the eye into the heart. The eye is the taster that feeds the appetite. First Eve saw that the tree was good for food, and then she took the fruit (Genesis 3:6). Watch your eyes. Some pagans actually gouged out their own eyes so they would not be tempted by impure sights. I am not saying to gouge out the eye — only to keep that gate shut. The Romans never let their prisoners go out in public without their keepers at their side. In the same way, never send your eyes out without sending their keepers with them.

Guard the ear, for much sin is carried to the heart through the ear. The apostle calls it "corrupt speech" (Ephesians 4:29), because impure conversation corrupts and poisons the heart. Keep your ear open to God and closed to sin. Make yourself deaf to the lies of the slanderer and the false teacher. Do not give your ear to anyone who comes to rob you of your heart.

To keep your heart, welcome Christ into it (Ephesians 3:17): "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Nothing can harm us but sin. If Christ is in the heart, He will purify it — His Spirit is the refiner's fire (Malachi 3:2). If Christ is in the heart, He

will adorn it. He will bring in the rich furnishings of His grace and beautify the hidden person of the heart (1 Peter 3:4). If Christ is in the heart, He will defend it. The fortress of the heart can never be taken when Christ is inside! Let Satan dig his tunnels, lay his gunpowder, and hurl his flaming projectiles — if the Lord of Hosts has pitched His tent in the heart, it can never be taken by force.

To keep your heart, take care to govern your thoughts (Jeremiah 4:14): "How long will wicked thoughts lodge within you?" What good does it do to set a guard at the door of your lips if you let your heart run freely into empty and impure thoughts? The heart is the inner chamber that is to be reserved for God. Vain thoughts defile this room and make it unfit for God to enter. Thoughts prepare the way for sin. While the mind broods, the heart catches fire. David let his heart wander into lustful thoughts, and that opened the door to the act of adultery (2 Samuel 11:4). Thoughts are the scouts that go ahead of sin — they first arouse it, and then the heart chases it down.

To keep your heart, keep careful accounts. Bring your heart to examination often. Ask it hard questions. Heart, what are you doing? Where are you headed? What work have you left undone? What sin do you need to grieve over? What grace do you need to strengthen? Examine your evidence. Check your claim to Christ (2 Corinthians 13:5). Search your soul carefully. Look to see whether any sin is being quietly tolerated. Search as Israel searched for leaven. Keep a journal of your soul. Track how things are going on the inside. Do not be a stranger in your own house. For failing to do this kind of inner work, many people remain in the dark and never understand the true state of their souls. They are known to others but die unknown to themselves.

How wise it is for a Christian to spend real time with his own heart! A person who wants to preserve his estate must keep his accounts up to date. Christian, set aside time every day to open the book of conscience. Deal honestly with your heart — it will always be looking to slip away into sin. Call it to account often. Seneca made a practice of asking himself every night, after his candle was out, what he had done that day. Frequent reckonings keep God and the conscience on good terms.

To keep your heart, build fences around it. Those who want to protect fruit or flowers put a fence around them. There are four fences we should build around our hearts.

The fear of God (Proverbs 23:17): "In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and His children will have refuge." Just as in natural fear the whole body reacts to protect the heart, so the fear of God protects the soul. Fear places a holy reverence on the soul and holds it back from sinful wandering. Fear bolts the door of the heart against empty and worthless things. Through the fear of the Lord, people turn away from evil (Proverbs 16:6). A nobleman's gatekeeper stands at the entrance to keep anything unworthy from being brought inside. In the same way, the fear of God stands as an armed guard at the gate of the heart, keeping temptations from entering. Fear stands watch. It takes its post on the watchtower and looks in every direction for approaching danger. Fear will not allow anything into the soul that would dishonor God.

Love without fear leads to presumption, and fear without love leads to despair. The love of God is the most powerful motivator for a willing heart. Love reasons like this: Has God given me Christ? Has He joined me to His promises? Has He settled a future inheritance of heaven on me? Then how can I live in a way that is

unworthy of this love? How could I willingly sin against this God? No — I would rather die than sin. This is what moved Anselm to say: let me fall into hell before I sin. Do you want to keep your heart? Surround it with love. Even death cannot break through this fence.

Faith — this is called a shield (Ephesians 6:16). The shield protects the head and guards the vital organs. This blessed shield of faith preserves the heart from harm. The shield in battle defends all the other armor — the helmet and the breastplate. In the same way, the shield of faith defends the other graces: the breastplate of love, the helmet of hope, the belt of truth. When Satan strikes at a Christian's heart, faith deflects the blow and wounds the head of the ancient serpent (1 Peter 5:9): "Resist him, firm in your faith." Faith is the best protection. Faith brings peace (Romans 15:13): "peace in believing." And that peace guards the heart (Philippians 4:7): "the peace of God will guard your hearts."

A good conscience. The physical heart sits in the center of the body, protected on all sides by the ribs and enclosed in a membrane that holds it in place. The ribs around the heart are like the graces that surround and protect the soul. The membrane that encloses the heart is like a good conscience — it keeps the soul safe from everything that would harm it. A good conscience is a bronze wall around the fortress of the heart. These are the fences that guard the heart.

If you want your heart to be kept, ask God to keep it for you. Do not take on this work in your own strength — look higher. Go to God. He is the great Keeper. "The Lord is your keeper" (Psalm 121:5). It is a great advantage to always go with such a keeper. This is why none of the saints are lost — because the Lord is their

keeper (1 Peter 1:5): "who are protected by the power of God." Every young ward has a guardian to watch over him. Choose God as your guardian. Those whom God keeps are safe. Lock up your heart with God, and give Him the key.

Here are the motivations that should persuade us to guard our hearts.

If we do not guard our hearts, the devil will take them. Are we willing to hand them over to Satan? When a hostile army takes a town, what destruction follows — looting, violence, killing. When Satan takes possession of hearts, he eventually drives them headlong — as he did the pigs — into destruction. Satan is first cunning, then cruel.

He is cunning. His business is to fish for hearts, and he is extraordinarily skilled at it. He has his strategies and schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11).

He studies a person's natural temperament and designs his bait accordingly. Satan cannot read the heart directly, but he can observe a person's character and tendencies. He tempts the cheerful, warm-blooded person with physical beauty, and the greedy person with gold. Just as a farmer knows which soil is best for barley and which for wheat, Satan has not been a tempter for so long without becoming a master of his dark craft.

Satan baits his hook with religion. He tempts people to sin under a cover of piety, disguising himself as an angel of light. He sometimes tempts people to end their own lives, suggesting they should not go on living and sinning against God. Who would suspect Satan when he comes speaking like a theologian and quoting Scripture? This is how cunningly the devil angles for hearts.

Once he has his prey, Satan is savage. His cruelty surpasses the fury of all the worst tyrants. We read of Hannibal, Antiochus, and Nero — who had Christians dressed in garments soaked in pitch and sulfur and set ablaze, turning them into human torches for passersby through the night. Even this is nothing compared to the unmatched brutality of Satan. His name is Apollyon — the Destroyer. He tore and threw the man he possessed into fire (Matthew 17:15). If he was this fierce while chained, what will he do when he has full power? When he had stripped Job of everything — his wealth, his health, and his children, crushed beneath a collapsed house — Satan in his own reckoning had barely touched him with a finger (Job 1:11). If the touch of his finger brings that much destruction, what will the full force of his power bring? Since Satan is so cunning in hunting hearts and so savage once he has them, let us guard our hearts carefully. If we do not keep them, Satan will keep them for us — and then the devastation will be beyond description.

The person who guards his heart guards his peace. Where do our inner turmoil and distress come from but the neglect of our spiritual watch? The person who keeps his heart all day may lie down in peace at night (Psalm 4:8). What a comfort this will be for a Christian in any circumstance. In a time of loss, he can say to himself: though I have lost my friends and my estate, I have kept my heart. In a time of sickness — we will all eventually be confined to a sickbed. But when a Christian is laid low, it will be no small comfort that he has kept his heart. In the hour of death: death may take away life, but it cannot take away the heart. That treasure God has claimed for Himself, and it is safely kept for Him.

THE HEAVENLY RACE



1 Corinthians 9:24 — "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win."

Religion is a matter of the highest importance. The soul — the nobler, more divine part of us — is what is at stake. How we live now determines whether we will be forever happy or forever lost. Solomon's advice is perfectly suited to this: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no work or thought or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The work of religion demands our fullest zeal and effort (Matthew 11:12).

Sometimes the work we must do to reach heaven is described as striving (Luke 13:24): "Strive to enter through the narrow door" — strive as in agony, strive as though your life depended on it. So says Cornelius a Lapide. Though we should be people of peace toward others, in the spiritual life we must be people of intense striving — a holy striving, a blessed contention. The apostle says let nothing be done through selfish ambition or rivalry. But though ri-

valry has no place among Christians, striving certainly has a place within a Christian — he must strive against his own heart, or he will never reach heaven.

Sometimes the work of reaching heaven is compared to wrestling (Ephesians 6:12): "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers." Our life is a constant wrestling match. As Jacob wrestled with the angel, so we must wrestle with our sinful desires. We should not cradle our sins, but put our feet on their necks. If we knock our sins down, it is not dishonorable to keep striking while they are down. We must also wrestle with Satan. Wrestlers try to get a grip on each other. Satan works to get a grip on us and throw us down — as he did our first parents. What the devil tried to do to Christ — throw Him from the pinnacle of the temple (Matthew 4) — he did to our first parents. He threw them from the pinnacle of happiness. Therefore we must wrestle with him. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

Sometimes the Christian life is compared to fighting (1 Timothy 6:12): "Fight the good fight of faith." Christ is the captain of the saints' forces. He is called "the author of their salvation" (Hebrews 2:10). We must all be soldiers. Faith is our shield, hope is our helmet, and the Word of God is our sword. We come into the world as onto a battlefield. Our sinful desires wage war against us (1 Peter 2:11) — so we have every reason to wage war against them. It is a day of battle, and it is dangerous to go out without our armor.

And sometimes the Christian's work toward heaven is compared to running a race — as in the text: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize?"

Run in such a way that you may win." In these words the apostle seems to allude — as many scholars observe — either to the Olympic games, held every five years in honor of Jupiter, or to the Isthmian games celebrated near Corinth in honor of Neptune. In those games, competitors gave everything they had to win the prize. So the apostle is saying: run the race of Christian living that is set before you with all possible speed and urgency, so that you may win the prize of salvation.

The text falls into two main parts.

The race to be run: "run in such a way."

The purpose of running: "that you may win."

Two observations arise from the text.

Christianity is a race.

Wise Christians should run in such a way as to win the prize: "run in such a way that you may win."

Doctrine: The first teaching is that Christianity is a race — or, the life of a Christian is a race (Hebrews 12:1): "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." We must be travelers before we can be those who have arrived. Heaven is a place of rest (Hebrews 4:9): "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God." There will be no more wrestling there, for we will have overcome the enemy. The saints in glory are pictured holding palm branches (Revelation 7:9) as a sign of victory. There will be no more running there. The prize having been won, the saints have thrones to sit and rest upon (Revelation 3:21). But this life is a race, and it must be run — and run well.

To explain this teaching, three questions need to be addressed.

1. In what ways is a Christian's life compared to a race? 2. In what ways does the Christian race differ from other races? 3. Why must this race be run?

In what ways is a Christian's life like a race? Four parallels stand out.

In a race there is a track to run in. In the same way, Christianity has a pathway (Psalm 119:32): "I shall run the way of Your commandments." This is a good and ancient way (Jeremiah 6:16) — as good as it is old. The way of holiness and obedience is the road the saints have always traveled, and the road on which God has been found. This is the track we must run.

This pathway is a pleasant one, sweetened with joy (Proverbs 3:17): "Her ways are pleasant ways" (Romans 15:13): "joy in believing." The way of religion is strewn with roses. What abundant fruit God provides, what refreshment He gives to those who turn their feet into this way!

The way of God's commandments is a clean way — a way paved with holiness (Isaiah 35:6). Christians can run this track without getting dirty. The way of sin, by contrast, defiles everyone on it. Those who habitually walk the paths of sin are covered in the filth of it. The roads of sin have such deep mud that people sink into destruction. But the Christian race is clean. Those who run it cleanse themselves from every impurity of body and spirit, growing in holiness (2 Corinthians 7:1).

A race demands hard work. Running a race is intense physical effort — runners put all their bodily strength into it. In the same way, Christianity is a race that requires effort. We must put all our strength into it. "My soul clings to You" (Psalm 63:8). "I press on"

(Philippians 3:13-14) — the word means I stretch my neck forward. The apostle says: "I press toward the goal." Runners in a race gather themselves together with full speed and stretch forward to seize the prize. A lazy wish or a halfhearted prayer will not win the crown. A Christian must press forward with full energy and wholehearted devotion in order to win what he is running for.

A race is short — "breve curriculum," as Horace calls it. The Greek word for a race refers to a short stretch of ground. The Olympian race, as authors report, was six hundred feet — one hundred twenty paces long. A race covers only a small distance and is quickly run. Since our time here is short, our race cannot be long. This should encourage us as we run and keep us from losing heart. Remember — it is only a short race. "After you have suffered for a little while" (1 Peter 5:10) — I might say the same: after you have run for a little while, you will be at the finish line. It is only a little while, Christians, and you will be done wrestling, weeping, and praying — and then you will reap the fruit of all your prayers. It is only a little while before you are done suffering and standing among the spirits of the righteous made perfect. It is only a little while before you reach the end of your race — "obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:9). How a child of God should rejoice to know he has covered much of the course and is nearing the finish! As Dr. Taylor the martyr once said: I have only two more stiles to cross, and then I will be at my Father's house. You who set out early for heaven and are now in old age, take comfort in this: you have only a few more steps to take, and then you are at the end of your race.

In a race there is a crown or wreath given to the winner. In the same way, those who finish the Christian race will wear a crown (2 Timothy 4:8). Those who fail to run — through laziness or pride — miss the reward. But those who faithfully run the heavenly race will receive a crown. This reward is fittingly compared to a crown because of its splendor. A crown set with jewels shines brilliantly and radiates light. No pen can describe it, no painter can picture it, no angel's tongue can express the glory and magnificence of this crown. All the beauties of heaven together — even if every star were a sun — could not fully capture it.

The second point to explain is how the Christian race differs from other races.

In other races, only one person wins the prize — as the text says: "only one receives the prize." But in the spiritual race, many win the prize. The saints will come to heaven from every corner of the world, east and west (Matthew 8:11): "Many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." In Revelation 7:4, there were 144,000 sealed from all the tribes of Israel. Then beyond that, a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, stood before the throne in white robes with palm branches in their hands. This innumerable multitude represents all who belong to God's election and are saved. They stand as conquerors, crowned, holding palms in their hands. If only one person could win the prize, there would be room for despair.

In other races, some stand on the sidelines and watch, and usually only two competitors run. But in the heavenly race, everyone must run. Even those who would be disqualified from any

other race must run this one — the lame and the blind included. No one is excused. All have run away from God through sin, and all must run back to Him through repentance. Either run or be damned — either fly toward heaven or fall toward hell.

In other races the feet do the running. But in the Christian race the heart runs (Psalm 119:32): "I shall run the way of Your commandments, for You will enlarge my heart." In religion, the heart is everything. What the heart does not do is simply not done. It is not raising your eyes or lifting your hands toward heaven that moves you forward in this race — it is the outward movement of the heart. Many people's tongues run in religion, but not their hearts. Do you believe with your heart (Romans 10:9)? Do you love God with all your heart (Matthew 22:37)? This is what it means to run the race of religion. This clears the ground and carries a Christian swiftly toward the goal. When David's heart was enlarged, he ran.

In other races, only the fastest runner wins the prize. But it is not so in the heavenly race. Even if others outrun us, if we hold on to the end we will still receive the reward. Some saints are like Asahel — swift as a gazelle (2 Samuel 2:18). They run fast in the race of obedience, as Ahimaaz outran Cushai (2 Samuel 18:23). But here is the comfort for weaker believers: even if you cannot run as fast as others, if you persevere to the end without giving up, you receive the crown. The worker who came in at the eleventh hour received the same pay as those who came at the first hour (Matthew 20:9). This shows that those who start later and may be outpaced by other Christians are still saved if they persevere.

In other races, men run for a temporary reward. In the Christian race, we run for an eternal one. Others run for a perishable crown (1 Corinthians 9:25). Sometimes the victor's wreath was made of olive, sometimes of myrtle. The Egyptians had a crown of cinnamon wrapped in gold — but it was still perishable. But the crown the saints run for is imperishable — "an unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). Other crowns are like garlands of flowers that soon wither (Proverbs 27:4). But the crown given to the conquering Christian never fades. The jewels of this crown are never lost, and the flowers never wilt.

In other races the prize is awarded based on merit. In the Christian race it is given as a gift of pure grace. Though we will not receive the prize unless we run, the prize is not ours because we ran. How could we ever earn such a reward? To earn something, we must first pay what we owe — and we have nothing to offer. Besides, what possible proportion could there be between a few years of running and an eternity of glory? For this reason the crown given to us is called a free gift (Romans 6:23): "the gift of God is eternal life." God gives His rewards in a way that brings Him glory. The saints will enjoy the comfort of their crown, and God will receive all the glory.

In other races, competitors often get in each other's way. But in the race to heaven, Christians help each other forward (1 Thessalonians 5:11): "Encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." One Christian helps another through prayer, counsel, and example. What is the fellowship of the saints, if not Christians pushing one another forward in the heavenly race?

You can lose other races and still be fine. But you cannot lose this race without being ruined. In other races a man simply loses his wager. But if he falls short in this spiritual race, he loses his soul. How fitting, then, is this apostolic warning (Hebrews 4:1): "Let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it."

The third point to address is why we must run this Christian race.

There are three reasons. First, because God has set this race before us (Hebrews 12:1): "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." It is not optional — whether to run is not left to our choice. God has assigned us this race. God's commands carry authority and power. When a general orders his army to march, they must march. There is no debating duty when God has spoken. The heavens send down their dew, the stars take their positions in battle formation, the earth produces its crops, the sea holds itself within its boundaries and does not dare go one step further. If lifeless creation obeys God's commands, how much more should those who are given reason? When God says to run the race, we must run.

There is no way to reach heaven except by running this race. By nature we are far from the goal, and if we want heaven we must run for it. A person who does not run this race cannot reach heaven any more than a traveler who never takes a single step on the road can reach his destination. "Be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

The time given to us is short. Job compares our life to a swift courier (Job 9:25): "My days are swifter than a runner." The ancient poets painted Time with wings. If time flies, we had better run. The night of death is coming quickly — and there is no running a race in the dark.

Application 1. This shows us that the business of religion is no idle matter. We must put all our strength and energy into it. Religion is a race. We must run — and run well. Being a Christian is demanding work. What shall we say, then, about those who stand idle all day? Come to many people, and you would think they had no race to run. They put their hands in their pockets (Proverbs 19:24). Is that a posture suitable for someone who must run a race? They stretch themselves out on their couches (Amos 6:4) — they would rather lie comfortably than run hard. Many people would like heaven to come to them, but they are unwilling to run toward it. If salvation would drop like a ripe fig straight into their mouths (Nahum 3:12), they would be quite happy — but they are not willing to run a race. Do not imagine you can be saved on such easy terms. The life of a Christian is not like the life of a nobleman. A nobleman has his rents brought to him by his manager whether he is awake or asleep. But do not think salvation will be delivered to you while you are stretching out on your comfortable beds. If you want the prize, run the race. A passenger on a ship may sit in the cabin or lie on the couch and still arrive safely at shore — but there is no reaching the heavenly port without rowing hard. Zacchaeus ran ahead to see Jesus (Luke 19:4). If we want to see God in His glory, we must run this race. We cannot have worldly things without effort — and do we think we can have heaven without it?

If the Christian life is a race, this justifies the urgency with which godly people press toward heaven (Psalm 119:60): "I hastened and did not delay to keep Your commandments." People of the world say: Why are you in such a hurry? Why are you so strict? Why do you run so fast? But a Christian may answer: religion is a race. I cannot run too fast — I can barely run fast enough. If anyone had asked Paul why he ran so hard and pressed forward to the goal, he would have answered that he was in a race. This explains and defends the saints' zeal and energy in pursuing heaven. They are racers — and a race cannot be run too fast. The world is quick to call all zeal madness. But do we not have every reason to press forward with all speed when this is a matter of life and death? If we do not run — and run well — we will never win the prize. If a man were running for a prize worth millions, would he not run with every ounce of speed he had? "The king's business requires haste" (1 Samuel 21:8). If anyone asks us: where are you going so fast? Why so much praying and weeping? We can say what David said: the king's business requires haste. God has set me a race to run, and I must not dawdle or lag behind. The haste Abigail made to go to King David (1 Samuel 25:34) prevented her death and the slaughter of Nabal's household. Our haste in the heavenly race will prevent damnation. This truth defends a Christian's urgent pursuit of holiness against all the mockery and criticism of the ungodly.

Application 2. This rebukes those who are running in the opposite direction — not the race God has set before them, but the race the devil has set: the race of wickedness. They dedicate their lives to drinking and pleasure. They make haste, but not toward heaven. They rush to satisfy their desires (Proverbs 6:18). They hurry to swear and get drunk. They are quick to shed blood (Isaiah 59:7):

"Their feet run to evil." The sinner, in the speed with which he rushes into sin, is compared to a swift camel (Jeremiah 2:23). A wicked person's race into sin is like Absalom's ride on his mule (2 Samuel 18:9): the mule carried him under the thick branches of an oak tree, his head got caught in the oak, and he was left suspended between heaven and earth. Sinners rush toward sin the way a bird rushes into a trap. They run like the demon-possessed pigs that charged into the sea and drowned (Mark 5:13). How fast people race toward hell — as if they feared the gates would be shut before they arrived! What is the urgency? Why run so fast toward a prison? The sins committed in haste will be repented of at great length. Achan rushed for the wedge of gold — and now he has more than enough time to regret it. Sin is an unhappy race — a ruinous race. Will it not end in bitterness (2 Samuel 2:26)? When men reach the end of that race, instead of a crown, they find chains of darkness (Jude 6).

This also rebukes those who, instead of running God's race, spend all their time in entertainment and pleasure — as though their life were a dance rather than a race. Job 21:12-13: "They sing to the timbrel and harp and rejoice at the sound of the flute. They spend their days in prosperity." They are at their music when they should be in the race. Amos 6:4: "They improvise to the sound of the harp, and like David have composed songs for themselves. They drink wine from sacrificial bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils." It is hard to have two heavens. Some people live only for pleasure. They are like hunting dogs that, while running through a field of flowers, stop to smell the blossoms and lose the scent of the hare — and abandon the hunt entirely. In the same way, many people find themselves among the sweet flowers of

worldly pleasure, stop to enjoy them, and leave off the race. Poison hides beneath the sweet honey. These people go merrily to hell. As Solomon says (Proverbs 14:13): "Even in laughter the heart may be in pain, and the end of joy may be grief."

If religion is a race, this rebukes those who move sluggishly in it — who creep along rather than run. Their pace is like the slow turning of the outermost sphere — dull and heavy. They should be like the sun racing across the sky, but instead they move like the shadow on a sundial — almost imperceptibly slow. Many Christians move so heavily in the ways of God that an observer can barely tell whether they are making any progress at all. They are quick to anger but slow to believe (Luke 24:25). See how fast Israel moved when Pharaoh was pursuing them! How urgently Christians should press forward when the devil is behind them, pursuing, ready to overtake them and cause them to lose the prize! Under the law, God would not accept a donkey as a sacrifice — He hates a dull, sluggish spirit. The snail was counted unclean (Leviticus 11:30). The slow-paced Christian will eventually be found wanting and miss the prize.

This rebukes those who begin the Christian race but fail to persevere to the end — those who give up along the way. Galatians 5:7: "You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?" The crown belongs to perseverance. The runner who covers half the course and then collapses loses the prize. It is a sad thing for a person to come close to heaven and then collapse in the race — as sad as watching a ship sink in sight of shore.

What shall we say about those who do worse than collapse — who actually turn around and run back into ungodliness, as Julian, Gardner, and others did? There is no path to heaven that runs

backward. Those who turn back throw shame on the ways of God. It is better never to start the race than to run in reverse. 2 Peter 2:21: "For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them." A soldier who abandons his flag and enlists in the enemy's army, if captured, should expect to face military law. Hebrews 10:38: "If he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him." God will bear with weakness, but He will punish betrayal. His wrath burns against the apostate. In warfare, there are times when a well-executed retreat — done skillfully to gain advantage over the enemy — is called an honorable retreat. But in the race to heaven, there must be no retreating. These are not honorable retreats — they are ruinous ones. "But if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him" — he draws back to destruction (Hebrews 10:38-39).

Let every Christian be urged to run this heavenly and blessed race. What arguments can I use to persuade you? Look at the rest of creation — everything moves with energy. Let their example put you to shame, Christian. Look up at the sky and see the sun like a mighty runner racing on his course (Psalm 19:5) — and will you stand still? Look into the air and see the birds soaring upward, climbing toward the sky. Look at the earth and see the bees busily working in the hive. Look at the angels — they are swift in obedience. Look at the Christians around you. You will see them in their race — reading, praying, weeping. And do you have nothing to do? Look at your precious time: time runs — will you stand still? Look at the wicked: how quickly they rush into sin. Will they run faster toward hell than you run toward heaven? Look at yourself: how in-

dustrious you are for the world — up early, crossing land and sea! Yet how dull and half-hearted in the matters of salvation. Will you run hard for a feather, a bubble, but not run for a kingdom?

To speed up your pace in godliness, consider what prize you are running for — a crown of glory. This crown contains all blessing within it. The race will soon be over, but the crown will have no end. This glorious reward should energize us in the race. But how should we run in order to win? It is a terrible thing to run and come away with nothing (Philippians 2:16). This brings us to the next application.

Application 4. Here are some directions for running this heavenly race well.

Watch out for the things that will slow you down in your race. First, shake off laziness. Idleness is the devil's pillow. A sluggish Christian will never win the race — he is sleeping when he should be running. Laziness is rust on the soul. It is a disease of the soul — and a sick person cannot run a race. The lazy man does not finish cooking what he caught while hunting (Proverbs 12:27). He would rather go hungry than make the effort to prepare his food. Shake off laziness. Abandon this idle spirit if you intend to run.

Throw off all weights. There are two kinds of weights to throw off.

The weight of sin (Hebrews 12:1): "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." David felt this weight (Psalm 38:4): "My iniquities have gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me." If we do not throw off this weight through repentance, it will drag us down to hell. A per-

son cannot run a race with a heavy load on his back. An impure person cannot run the race of holiness. A proud person cannot run the race of humility. A self-willed person cannot run the race of obedience. Christian, unburden your soul of sin. Throw off this weight if you intend to seize the crown.

The second weight the spiritual runner must throw off is the world. This is a golden weight that has tripped up many and caused them to lose the race. To the extent that the world is a weight, throw it off. I am not saying to give up using the things of the world — I am saying to stop loving them as an end in themselves (1 John 2:15). When the golden dust of the world is blown into people's eyes, it blinds them so they cannot see the course they are meant to run.

Get rid of false ideas about this race.

The first false idea is that the race is easy. Many people think they can run the race from earth to heaven on their deathbed. Sinner, if you think this race is easy, you are a stranger to it. You are dead in sin until God infuses a supernatural principle of grace into you (Ephesians 2:1). Is it easy for a dead person to run a race? Running the way of God's commandments goes against our nature. Is it easy for a person to act against everything he naturally is? Is it easy for water to flow backward in its own channel? Is it easy for a person to deny himself, crucify his flesh, and cut off a beloved sin? Do not make the mistake of thinking the Christian race is easy. Do you know what the Christian life will cost you — and what it may cost you?

The second false idea to avoid is that the race to heaven is impossible — that there is so much to do that we could never possibly win. Cyprian confessed that before his conversion he had many thoughts bordering on despair. He imagined he would never overcome certain corruptions in his life. The thought that something is impossible cuts the tendons of all effort. God has encouraged us to run not only by promising rewards when we win, but by promising the strength to run. Has He not said He will put His Spirit within us (Ezekiel 36)? And inspired by the Spirit, we can run and not grow weary. How many people has Satan discouraged through despair? The doubting soul says: I may run, but I could never run well enough to win. Jeremiah 2:25: "There is no hope." The despairing person says: I might as well keep going in my sins and stay on the old road. There is no hope — every source of mercy has been cut off. This is a dangerous cliff. Despair knocks a person off his feet — and how can he run? Despair is the great destroyer of souls. The person under its power talks himself straight into hell.

Watch out for company that holds you back along the way. If a man is running a race and a friend grabs his hand and asks to have a conversation, that could cost him the race. This is exactly the danger here. Many people will be ready to intercept us and stop us on our way to heaven. They will say: why are you starting so soon? Why do you run so hard? Stop and enjoy the pleasures of the world for a while. Many have been stopped mid-race by such distractions and have lost the prize as a result. To anyone who tries to hinder us in the race, we must say with holy firmness, as Christ did: "Get behind Me, Satan" (Matthew 4:10).

You must use every available means to help you in the heavenly race.

Run the right race. The apostle calls it "the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1) — that is, the race marked out in God's Word, the race of self-denial and holy living. It is not just any race, but the specific race set before us, that we must run. This refutes the idea that a person can be saved by following any religion he chooses.

Prepare yourself for the heavenly race.

Watch your diet. Ancient runners, according to Irenaeus, carefully regulated what they ate — avoiding heavy foods and large meals so they would be better prepared to run. In the same way, Christians should discipline themselves through self-control and mortification of the flesh, so that by ordering their lives well they may be better fitted to run the race set before them. Paul disciplined his body (1 Corinthians 9:27) so that he would be more fit for his race.

Strip down for the race. A runner in a race removes everything extra and wears only a light white garment, so he can move freely. Christians should do the same — strip away all claims of personal merit, and wear only the white garment of Christ's righteousness.

Start the race early (Ecclesiastes 12:1): "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth." Young people think they can wait to start the race. But can a person be good too soon? Can someone repent too early? Even if he could — it is far better to repent a year too soon than an hour too late. Esau's tears came just as late as his venison (Genesis 27:33-34). David would seek God early (Psalm 36:1). Augustine confessed in his writings that he bitterly regretted not coming to know God sooner. Those who carry both old age and old sins into the race will find it very hard to run.

Take the narrow path, not the wide road. The road to hell is crowded — most people are going the wrong way (Exodus 23:2): "You shall not follow the crowd in doing evil." The crowd doesn't ask what is best — only what feels safest. Our Savior has told us: "narrow is the way that leads to life" (Matthew 7:14). Run in the narrow way of self-denial and putting sin to death.

Commit to staying in the race through dangers and difficulties. A good Christian must be hardened with courage and burning with zeal. There will likely be thorns and sharp stones in the path of this race — so you had better be well shod.

You must be shod with the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15). The person whose heart is filled with the peace that the gospel brings will be able to run through the hardest stretches of the Christian life with ease.

You must also be shod with patience (Hebrews 12:1): "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Patience holds a Christian's heart up and keeps him from wearing out in the race. If this shoe comes off, he will soon start limping and give up running.

Christians must keep their eyes fixed on the finish line throughout the race. The Greeks had a white line drawn at the end of their racecourse, and the runner's gaze was fixed on it. Keeping the prize in view quickens Christians in the race. Paul looked steadily toward the goal (Philippians 3:14), the way archers fix their eyes on the target and runners fix their gaze on the prize. Moses (Hebrews 11:26) looked to the reward. He fixed one eye on God's glory and the other on the crown that awaited him.

Run with delight (Psalm 119:47): "I shall delight in Your commandments." Oil loosens the joints and makes them move freely. The oil of gladness makes Christians energetic and fit to run the heavenly race. "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

Run in the strength of Christ. Do not think you can win this race on your own. Those who hold to free will speak of human ability, but it is not of "him who wills or him who runs" (Romans 9:16). By nature we are blind and lame — unfit to run. We run best when Christ takes us by the hand.

If you want to run in such a way as to win, keep grace in active use. It is not enough to have grace as a possession — you must have it in operation. Those who run the heavenly race must not merely be alive but lively. They need a vigorous faith and a fervent love. What does it mean to have "your loins girded and your lamps burning" (Luke 12:35) but grace in full activity? Without this, there can be no speed in the heavenly race.

If you want to run hard, pray hard. Prayer carries you forward in the race. Luther was a man of prayer. Make this prayer your own (Song of Solomon 1:4): "Draw me away! We will run after you."

Pray that you will not lose your way through doctrinal error, or stumble through offenses. Above all, pray for the Holy Spirit, who energizes us in the race and carries us beyond our own natural strength. God's Spirit breathed into us keeps us in breath.

THE SACRED ANCHOR



Titus 2:13 — "Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus."

A Christian's true happiness lies ahead — it is still to come. In this life, a saint is a candidate and heir-in-waiting for heaven. He has little in hand, but much in hope. As the text says: "looking for that blessed hope."

Whether we look inward or outward, there is plenty to make us long for that hope.

When we look inward at our sins, we echo Paul's own cry: "Wretched man that I am" (Romans 7:24). A Christian has two natures within him — the flesh and the Spirit. This is reason enough to look forward to that blessed hope, when he will be freed from his sins and will be like the angels of God.

When we look outward, we see that the world is only a stopping-place on our journey. It is a stage where vanity and trouble play their parts, and the scene rarely changes. "Arise and go, for this is not your resting place" (Micah 2:10). All of this gives us reason to look forward to that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior.

In this text there are: 1. The action — looking. 2. The object, which is described in two ways.

Emphatically: that blessed hope.

Specifically: the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Let us begin with the action — looking. There are three kinds of looking.

Looking with desire — as a servant looked forward to the year of jubilee and release (Leviticus 25:40), or as a bride looks forward to her wedding day. Now is a time of separation from our Husband Christ, so we are clothed in mourning and have hung our harps on the willows. But how the bride longs for the wedding day when the marriage will be celebrated! At that wedding, water will be turned into wine. How the godly soul cries out with holy longing: how long, Lord? Why does Your chariot take so long to come? Why do the wheels of Your chariot delay? It is the prayer of the whole church (Revelation 22:20): "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly."

Looking with joy (Romans 5:2): "We exult in hope of the glory of God." There is terror in a sinner's looking forward — described as "a terrifying expectation of judgment" (Hebrews 10:27), like a person in debt who every hour expects the bailiff to come and arrest him. But the saint's looking forward is joyful — like someone expecting a dear friend or waiting for someone to deliver a large sum of money owed to him. So Moses looked with joy toward the reward (Hebrews 11:26).

Looking with patience — as a farmer sows seed in the ground and waits patiently for the crop to come up (James 5:7): "The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient

about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." That is enough on the action of looking.

The object: that blessed hope. Here we need to consider: 1. What hope is. 2. What a Christian hopes for.

What hope is. Hope is a theological grace planted in the heart by the Holy Spirit, by which a Christian is stirred to expectantly await what God has promised (Romans 8:25): "But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." Aquinas describes hope this way: hope concerns a good that is difficult, future, and possible.

Hope concerns a good. This is how it differs from fear — fear looks at evil, hope looks at good.

Hope concerns a future good. This is how it differs from joy — joy is engaged with something present, hope with something still to come. So Clement of Alexandria defines hope.

Hope concerns a difficult good — something that is hard to obtain. This is how hope differs from mere desire. Desire is weak and short-lived — it quickly passes. Hope is resolute and steady. It wrestles with difficulties and will not let go until it has what it waits for.

Hope concerns a possible good — something that can actually be attained. This is how hope differs from despair. Despair looks at everything through dark glasses and writes everything off as lost. Hope is like the cork floats on a fishing net, keeping the heart from sinking into despair. Now you understand what hope is.

A question arises here: how does hope differ from faith?

These two graces — faith and hope — are so similar that they have often been confused for one another. Luther says the relationship between them is so close that it is hard to find a distinction. But though they stand close together like the two wings of the cherubim on the mercy seat, they are not the same thing. In some ways faith and hope do agree. Both feed on God's promises. Both help to sustain the soul in trouble. Faith and hope are like two flotation bladders under a Christian, keeping him from sinking in the waters of affliction. Both graces, like strong restorative medicine, revive the fainting soul — there is "joy in believing" (Romans 15:13) and "exultation in hope" (Romans 5:2). Faith and hope, like those two golden pipes in Zechariah's vision (Zechariah 4:12), pour their golden oil of joy into a Christian. Yet though these two graces agree in some ways, they also differ.

Faith and hope differ in order and priority. Faith comes first — it is the mother grace. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for" (Hebrews 11:1). God's promises are precious — like the ark of the covenant, which contained the manna. But we must first believe the contents of a promise before we can hope for them. Jerome says it well: faith lights the lamp of hope, just as the fire on the altar lit the lamps of the sanctuary. In terms of order, then, hope is the daughter of faith.

They also differ in their nature — in two ways.

Hope looks only forward, at things still to come. Faith looks both backward and forward — at past events as well as future ones. Faith believes in Christ's suffering and resurrection, as well as His coming in glory.

Hope looks at the excellence of the promise; faith looks at its certainty. Hope reads the text of the promise; faith looks at the seal. "In hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised" (Titus 1:2). What hope looks at is eternal life. What faith looks at is the trustworthiness of the promise — God, who cannot lie, has promised it. In short: faith believes, hope waits. Faith shows a Christian the promised land; hope sails toward it with patience. Faith strengthens hope, and hope comforts faith — as an elm supports a vine, and the vine repays the elm by covering it with fruit. Faith is the cable and hope is the anchor. Together they keep the soul steady so it does not run aground on hidden shoals or sink into quicksand. That is enough on the first question — what hope is.

The second question: what does a Christian hope for?

Emphatically: that blessed hope. Here hope is used to stand for the thing hoped for — the hope of blessedness. A Christian's true hope is not in this life. If it were, he would be in a hopeless position. This world offers nothing to hope for except constant change — everything in it shifts and passes. But he is looking for that blessed hope. Here is the difference between a sailor's anchor and a believer's anchor: the sailor casts his anchor downward into the sea; the believer casts his anchor upward into heaven. The believer is a wealthy heir (Hebrews 6:17) waiting for the royal crown to be placed on his head. In law there are two kinds of freehold: a freehold in deed is when a person has actually taken possession of land and holds it. A freehold in law is when a person has a legal right to the land but has not yet taken possession. Heaven is a believer's freehold in law. He has a right to it — promised by the Father, purchased by the Son, guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. But he does not

yet hold it in deed. He waits on God's timing and looks for that blessed hope, until the day comes when he will actually enter into his inheritance.

The object of a Christian's hope is described specifically: the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ. In passing, note that the full deity of Christ is powerfully proven here against the Arians, as Jerome and Chrysostom both observe. The apostle identifies who this great God is — it is our Savior Jesus Christ.

To speak of the object of a Christian's hope as described specifically: the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior. There are three distinct appearances, or epiphanies, of Christ.

There is Christ's appearing to us — His incarnation (Isaiah 9:6): "To us a Child is born." This was a glorious appearing. When this morning star rose, salvation appeared to the human race. When Christ took on flesh, He united our human nature to the divine nature. The virgin's womb was the sacred place where that union was formed. This is a great mystery — "God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16) — a wonder that the angels themselves look upon with awe (1 Peter 1:12). God once said, "The man has become like one of Us" (Genesis 3:22). Now we may say the reverse: God Himself has become like one of us — "made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). This was Christ's first appearing.

There is Christ's appearing in us — when He appears within our hearts, described as Christ being formed in us (Galatians 4:19). Christ is said to appear in us when, through the work of His grace, He transforms us into His own image. In the incarnation, Christ made Himself like us. Through sanctification, He makes us like

Him — holy as He is holy. What benefit do we receive from Christ appearing in human flesh if He does not appear in our hearts? What is a Christ who is outside us worth, unless we have a Christ within us (Colossians 1:27)? "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

There is Christ's appearing for us — and this happens in two ways.

Christ appears for us as our advocate (Hebrews 9:24): "He entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." This is a metaphor drawn from our law courts, where an attorney argues on behalf of his client. In the same way, Christ pleads as advocate for the saints. Satan is the accuser, but Christ is the advocate — He answers every charge that is brought against us. He appears in the very presence of God for us. The high priests under the old covenant appeared before the ark and the mercy seat — which were only images of God's presence. But Christ appears in the actual presence of God, face to face. He presents His merits before His Father and pleads for mercy on the basis of His atoning death. If Christ appears for us in heaven, should we not appear for Him on earth?

Christ also appears for the saints as judge — and this is the appearing referred to in the text: "looking for the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior."

Christ's first appearing in the flesh was humble and unremarkable. His glory was veiled (Isaiah 53:2) — those who saw the man could not see the Messiah. But His second appearing as judge will be a glorious appearing — like the sun breaking through a cloud. It will be glorious both with respect to Christ Himself and with respect to the saints.

Glorious with respect to Christ Himself — in three ways.

His person will be glorious. The light that shone on Paul — brighter than the sun (Acts 26:13) — was only a fraction of Christ's glory, a single spark from the Sun of Righteousness. What will it be when He appears in the full radiance of His splendor?

His throne will be glorious. He will sit on the throne of His glory (Matthew 25), with a seat of state more magnificent than ivory or pearl — a throne of surpassing grandeur.

His attendants will be glorious (Matthew 25:31): "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him." The angels are the courtiers of heaven. They are compared to lightning (Matthew 28:3) for the brilliance of their radiance. These glorious, exalted beings will form part of Christ's royal procession as He takes His throne. So the second coming will be glorious with respect to Christ.

It will also be glorious with respect to the saints. Christ will appear to do three things for them.

Christ as judge will appear to acquit His people — pronouncing the sentence: "Come, you who are blessed of My Father." Every debt will be crossed out in the blood of the Lamb.

Christ as judge will appear to vindicate His people. The names of the godly are often buried under reproach during this life. But on that day, as Bernard says, they will be fragrant with the finest ointments — Christ will give them a new name. He will call them His friends, His bride, the apple of His eye. Their names will flourish with honor and send out their fragrance like the wine of Lebanon.

Christ as judge will appear to crown His people — when body and soul are reunited and perfected in glory. Christ will take His people into His eternal, joyful embrace. He will hold them close, seat them on His throne, and fill them with the overflowing wine of His love forever. So now you see what the saints' hope is — namely, the glorious appearing of Christ, when He will come as judge to acquit, vindicate, and crown them.

Application 1. See here the misery of the wicked person who places all his hope in this present life. He makes his wealth his hope and casts his anchor downward. He cannot hope for Christ's appearing — he fears it. He is like a prisoner who dreads the judge taking the bench. Christ's appearing will be a dreadful day for him. When Christ appears, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear (1 Peter 4:18)? A wicked person is like a sailor at sea with no anchor — like a man in a storm with no shelter. It is with the sinner as it was with the ancient world when the flood came. The waters rose steadily — first covering the valleys, then the hills, then the mountains, then the tops of the trees — and at last they had nothing to hold on to. All hope of survival was gone. So it is with the sinner: if one comfort is taken away, he still has another. If a loved one is gone, he still has his money. If one crutch breaks, he leans on another. But then sickness comes, and he sees that he must die and appear before his judge. Now he has no hope. He dies in despair and must lie forever in the burning furnace of God's wrath.

He carries empty water in leaking vessels — hollow vessels filled with the waters of forgetfulness.

Examine yourself. Do you have this blessed hope of Christ's appearing and of your own appearing with Him in glory? Speak to almost any person and you will hear him say he hopes to be saved. Let every soul put itself to the test. I will show you four differences between genuine hope and false hope built on sand.

True hope is energizing. It sets a person to work for heaven. It is called "a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3) — it puts life into a person. Hope is a spur to duty and a sharpener for diligence. Hope of victory makes the soldier fight. Hope of profit drives the merchant to sail across every ocean. Divine hope is like wind in the sails or wheels under a chariot — it makes a Christian active in faith. He runs in the path of God's commands. Hope wrestles with difficulties, disregards danger, and advances in the face of death. True hope never gives up until it has obtained what it waits for. The person with divine hope will follow Christ even into a furnace. He will profess the truth even when the next words are: Christians to the lions. As Tertullian notes, the Romans would endure extreme hardship — fighting through cold and hunger, running any risk — for the hope of one day becoming a consul, which (as Tertullian says) was an honor that lasted only a year. How much more effort will a person make who has a hope of heaven, where he will wear a crown of glory forever! Can a person truly claim to hope in God while he stands idle all day (Proverbs 19:24)? Hypocrites have a weak, wishful wanting — they would like to be saved but do nothing. Their hope is not a living hope but a dead one. True hope is like fire in the soul — always active, always sparking or blazing.

True hope is purifying (1 John 3:3): "Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself." Hope is to the soul what lightning is to the air — it clears it. The person who has hope in Christ

sets himself against all sin, both in intention and in practice. He is a consecrated person, with holiness to the Lord inscribed on his heart. Bernard compares holiness to the root and hope to the branch. True hope blossoms from the root of holiness. Test your hope by this scriptural standard: the hypocrite says he has hope — but has he been purified? An impure person — hoping to go to heaven? Nothing that defiles will ever enter there (Revelation 21:27). A drunkard — hoping to be saved? Do you think you will reel your way into heaven? The wicked person is not truly assured of happiness — he is simply unconcerned about his lack of it.

True hope is a good hope (2 Thessalonians 2:16): "who has given us good hope through grace." A wicked person's hope is no better than his heart. The Hebrew word for hope carries the meaning of both confidence and foolishness — fittingly applied to the hope of the wicked, because their confidence is foolishness. The godly person's hope is compared to an anchor (Hebrews 6:19). The wicked person's hope is compared to a spider's web (Job 8:14). A sinner's hope is fittingly compared to a spider's web in three ways.

A spider's web has no foundation. The same is true of the hope of the wicked — it looks pleasant but has nothing solid to rest on. A godly person's hope, by contrast, is built on a double foundation.

The Word of God (Psalm 130:5): "In His word do I hope." The Word says: let the sinner forsake his way, and the Lord will abundantly pardon. The Word says: "We know that He abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given us" (1 John 3:24). A child of God, finding these marks at work in him, builds his hope for heaven upon them.

A godly person's hope is also built on experience (Romans 5:4): "tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." A believer can bring a long record of God's faithfulness (Psalm 119:65): "You have dealt well with Your servant." When his sins and temptations have been overwhelming, God has come with reinforcement and His grace has been enough. When his heart has been sinking in fear, God has lifted him out of the quicksand and raised his head above the deep water (Psalm 3:3): "But You, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the One who lifts my head." When his heart has grown cold and lifeless in worship, the Spirit has gently tuned his soul, and now he makes melody in his heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19). Experience produces hope. And hope that stands on one foot on a promise and the other on experience stands strong. But a wicked person's hope is a spider's web — he has nothing solid to ground it on. His hope is a delusion, a golden dream (Isaiah 29:8): like a hungry man who dreams he is eating, but wakes up and his soul is still empty. The sinner's hope is like a dying man's will that has neither seal nor witnesses — null and void in law. That is exactly what the wicked person's hope amounts to. His hope promises him great things — that Christ is his, that all the privileges of heaven are his — but it is pure illusion. When examined, it lacks both the seal of the Word to confirm his title and the witness of the Spirit. It is a terrible thing to go to hell with the hope of heaven.

A spider spins her web from her own body — she draws everything from within herself. A bee draws everything from outside herself. The material for her honeycomb she gathers from flowers. A true Christian, like the bee, draws everything from outside himself — he draws from the sweet flower of Christ's righteousness

(Isaiah 45:24): "In the Lord I have righteousness and strength." But a wicked person, like the spider, draws all his hope from within himself — he spins the thread of his hope out of his own religious duties and good behavior. This is why his hope is like a spider's web.

A spider's web is fragile. The slightest breath shakes it; the slightest touch breaks it. The sinner's hope is the same. The slightest pang of conscience shakes it (Job 8:14): "whose hope will be cut off." Usually, before a wicked person's life is cut off, his hope is cut off first. The godly person's hope is a good hope — solid and grounded in Scripture. The wicked person's hope is a spider's web.

True hope is enduring (Hebrews 3:6): "We are His house if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end." True hope does not falter. It is not shattered by suffering. It is a diamond-hard grace. Hope enables us to endure. This is why it is compared to an anchor that holds the ship steady in a storm, and to a helmet (1 Thessalonians 5:8). A helmet deflects the blow of a sword or arrow. In the same way, hope as a helmet deflects blows from a Christian so they do not wound or discourage him. In times of public disaster, hope keeps the soul from sinking (Joel 3:16): "The Lord roars from Zion. Heaven and earth tremble — but the Lord is a refuge for His people." Even when heaven and earth seem to be falling apart, a believer's hope holds. A believer never throws away his anchor. The Jews were captives in Babylon, yet they were prisoners of hope (Zechariah 9:12): "Return to the stronghold, O prisoners who have the hope." When a Christian is on his deathbed and all hope of earthly life is gone, his hope in God remains.

What immeasurable comfort this is for a child of God who, upon honest self-examination, finds he has a well-founded hope! When Christ appears, it will be a glorious appearing for the believer. A Christian is like a wealthy heir with great estates yet to come into his possession. He has much in hope. When Alexander had given away nearly everything he had in Greece, someone asked what he had kept for himself. He answered: hope — meaning he had hope of conquering more kingdoms, which he later did. If a Christian's earthly comforts were all taken away and someone asked what he had left, he could say: the anchor of hope. He has a confident hope of those eternal mansions which Jesus Christ has gone to prepare for him (John 14:2). "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:4). What comfort this brings! How it can lighten and sweeten every cross we carry. After the bitter waters of Marah comes the wine of paradise. After a wet spring comes a joyful harvest.

Application 4. Let us be urged to cheerfulness (Romans 5:2): "We exult in hope of the glory of God." Fear produces sorrow; hope produces joy. Divine hope, says Augustine, cannot exist without some element of joy. Does a Christian have hope of heaven and yet not rejoice (Proverbs 10:28)? "The hope of the righteous is gladness."

But someone may say: it will be a long time before we enter into our heavenly inheritance, and "hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Proverbs 13:12).

It is not long (Revelation 22:12): "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me." In faith's reckoning, this glorious reward we hope for is near. Faith makes future things present —

what hope says will be, faith says already is. Christ's coming is at hand. The bright morning star is beginning to rise. A telescope makes distant objects appear close to the eye. In the same way, faith makes Christ, heaven, and the day of reward appear near — it gives the soul a kind of possession of them even now. So rejoice, Christians! Turn your mourning into praise. It is only a little while before you will receive those blessed things you hope for. Think of the certainty of Christ's appearing: "Behold, I come." And think of the speed: "I come quickly."

Hold on to your hope against every discouragement — whether from fear or from temptation. Do not let the devil argue you out of your hope. A soldier who has taken the high ground will not let the enemy drive him off it, but will hold it to his last breath. Has God placed you on higher ground? Has He raised your hope as high as heaven itself? Do not be driven off that ground. Hold your hope to the very end. Pray that God will make your title to heaven even clearer, so that you may stand as firm as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved.

How this hope should make us abound in the work of the Lord! The person with a well-grounded hope of heaven — how fervent he should be in duty, how zealous in God's cause! The hope of glory should fire and energize a Christian. If there could be any regret in heaven, surely it would be that we did not serve God more faithfully here. What an immeasurable gap there is between our work and our reward! Let divine hope be like oil in a lamp and wind in the sails — propelling us forward in holy, energetic service to God. We sow in hope (Galatians 6:9): "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary."

Let us live in a way that matches our hope — walking in holiness, as though already near to the life of heaven. Those who have heaven in their hopes should have heaven in their lives. Let us follow the perfect pattern Christ has left us (1 John 2:6). Just as we hope to have Christ's death credited to us for justification, we must have His life before us as our model. I will close with these words (Philippians 1:27): "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

THE TREES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS BLOSSOMING AND BRINGING FORTH FRUIT



Philippians 1:11 — "Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

In this chapter the apostle Paul offers a heartfelt prayer to God for the Philippians. Among his requests, he makes two especially noteworthy petitions.

That they might be sincere (verse 10).

That they might be fruitful — expressed in the words of the text: "having been filled with the fruit of righteousness." In these words, notice:

The substance: filled with fruit.

The source: through Jesus Christ.

The purpose: to the glory and praise of God.

Doctrine: Christians should above all things pursue fruitfulness. The saints are called "trees of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:3). These spiritual trees must not only produce leaves, but fruit — be-

ing filled with the fruit of righteousness. Two questions need to be addressed.

1. How does a Christian bear fruit? 2. What is the fruit he bears?

How does a Christian bear fruit? He bears fruit by remaining in the vine. By nature we are fruitless — not one good blossom grows from us on our own. But when we are grafted into Christ through faith, we grow and bear fruit (John 15:4): "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me." Jesus Christ is the blessed root that sends the sap of grace up into His branches. The Pelagians tell us we have enough within ourselves to produce good fruit — but how wrong they are. Does not the root feed the branches? Is it not "from His fullness" that we have all received (John 1:16)? Significantly, Christ calls the bride's grace His own grace (Song of Solomon 5:1): "I have gathered my myrrh with my spice" — Christ says not your myrrh, but my myrrh. If the saints bear any spiritual fruit, they owe it entirely to Christ. It is His wine, His myrrh (Hosea 14:8): "From Me comes your fruit."

What is the fruit a good Christian bears? It is: 1. Inward fruit. 2. Outward fruit. 3. Fitting fruit. 4. Timely fruit.

A Christian bears inward fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and faith (Galatians 5:22). This fruit is sweet and ripens under the Sun of Righteousness. It is the ripe fruit that God delights to taste (Micah 7:1).

There is the fruit of wholesome speech (Proverbs 15:4): "A soothing tongue is a tree of life." Gracious words fall from a godly person's lips the way ripe fruit falls from a tree.

There is the fruit of good works (Colossians 1:10). At the last day God will say: show me your faith by your works (James 2:18). A true saint does all the good he can, honoring God with what he has. Knowing he will be in the world only a short while, he lives intensely — packing a great deal of work into a small amount of time. Not long before His suffering, Christ said (John 17:4): "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." How can people be said to finish their work who have never yet begun any good work?

A Christian also bears fitting fruit — the godly person brings forth his fruit (Psalm 1:3), meaning the fruit that is appropriate for him to bear in his particular station. What is this fitting and proper fruit? It is being faithful in our callings and our relationships. For a magistrate, justice is fitting fruit (Deuteronomy 16:19); for a minister, zeal (Acts 17:16); for a parent, instruction (Deuteronomy 4:10); for a child, reverence (Ephesians 6:1); for a master, good example (Genesis 18:19; Ephesians 6:9); for a servant, obedience (1 Peter 2:18); for a husband, love (Ephesians 5:25); for a wife, submission (Ephesians 5:22); for a tradesman, diligence (Exodus 20:9); for a soldier, integrity (Luke 3:14). I will never believe someone is truly godly if he does not bear this kind of fitting fruit. "A good Christian but a bad master" or "a good Christian but a bad parent" — these phrases simply don't fit together. A minister cannot be truly good if he lacks zeal, any more than wine can be good if it has lost its strength. A magistrate cannot be truly good if he lacks justice, any more than a pillar can be called sound if it leans. A child cannot be truly good if he does not honor his parents, any more than a traitor can be called loyal. When Absalom rose in rebellion against his father, the mule he was riding — as though weary of carrying such a

burden — left him hanging by his head in a great oak tree, suspended between heaven and earth, neither able to ascend the one nor worthy to walk upon the other.

Let Christians be encouraged to bear proper, genuine fruit and to shine in their various relationships. Consider:

A person who is not faithful in his relationships rightly falls under suspicion of hypocrisy. A man may appear to be repentant or devout — but if he does not bear fruit fitting to his station, he is no tree of righteousness. He is a wild, stunted plant. Some will pray, attend sermons, and speak well of religion — and that is good. But what about the bleating of sheep? They are not faithful in their relationships. This reveals something unsound in them. A good Christian works to fill every role he holds and to move through every area of godly responsibility, the way the sun moves through every sign of the zodiac. I have little use for Christians who appear to be traveling toward heaven, yet treat the duties of their relationships as unexplored territory they never go near.

The excellence of a Christian is shown by bearing the fruit that fits his particular position. A member of the body shows its worth by performing its proper function. The eye is for seeing, the ear for hearing. In the same way, a Christian's excellence lies in bearing the fruit God has appointed for his station. What good is anything that does not do what it is made to do? What good is a clock that won't strike? A ship that won't sail? A rose that gives off no scent? What good is a professing Christian who gives off no sweet fragrance in his relationships? A thing proves its worth when it exercises its proper function.

Failing to bear fitting fruit undermines all the other fruit we produce. If a doctor were compounding a medicine and left out the key ingredient, the medicine would lose its healing power. If a painter were drawing a portrait and left out one of the eyes, it would ruin the picture. There are many to whom Christ will say at the day of judgment, as He said to the rich young man (Luke 18:22): "One thing you still lack." You have prayed, fasted, and heard sermons — yet one thing you lack. You have not been faithful in your relationships.

Relational faithfulness greatly adorns a Christian. It is the beauty of a star to shine in its proper orbit. Being faithful in one's relationships makes a Christian sparkle with genuine grace.

A good Christian brings forth timely fruit (Psalm 1:3): "Who yields his fruit in his season." "He has made everything appropriate in its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Something good at one time may be entirely out of place at another. There is real skill in knowing when to do something. Religious duties must be carried out at the right moment.

Christian duties toward our neighbors must be observed in their proper season.

Our reproving others must be timely. Rebuke is a duty — when we see others walking in a disorderly way, like soldiers out of rank, we should gently but earnestly point out their sin (Leviticus 19:17). But this fruit must be brought forth at the right time.

Do it privately (Matthew 18:15): "Go and show him his fault in private."

Do it when the person is in a calm state of mind, not when his emotions are running high. That would be like pouring oil on a fire. When his spirit has quieted and softened — that is when to press a rebuke home. A seal is pressed into wax while it is soft and yielding. There are moments when people are more open and receptive. That is the best time to press a reproof on them — it is most likely to leave an impression. When Abigail rebuked Nabal, she chose the right moment — not when he was drunk, but when he was clearheaded and able to receive correction (1 Samuel 25:37).

Another fitting time for reproof is when someone is going through hardship. Suffering softens a person's spirit, and a word of correction spoken wisely at that point may work together with the affliction. A bitter remedy is not refused when the pain is severe enough. Affliction opens the ear to discipline (Job 36:10).

Our comforting others must also be timely (Proverbs 15:23): "A word spoken at the right time — how good it is!" When we see someone who has fallen into sin and is weeping bitterly like Peter — that is the moment for a word of comfort. When the Corinthian was deeply humbled, the apostle called for oil and wine to be poured into his wounds (2 Corinthians 2:7): "You should rather forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." When the soul is broken over sin, bring the soothing medicine of a promise. Open up God's mercy and faithfulness to the sinner whose spirit is crushed. A word of comfort spoken at the right time is like setting a dislocated joint back in place. This is bearing timely fruit — giving encouragement to those whose hearts

are heavy. "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul" (Proverbs 16:24). Job's friends claimed to bring comfort, but instead of pouring oil into his wounds, they poured in vinegar.

Religious duties that relate to God must also be performed in their season.

Mourning for sin is a duty. God values a broken heart (Psalm 51:17). The weeping prayer of a repentant sinner is powerful with God. Yet there are times when mourning is not the most fitting response. When God has given us a remarkable deliverance and that mercy calls loudly for rejoicing — if instead we hang our harps on the willows and sit in sadness, that grief is fruit out of season. God set apart the Feast of Tabernacles as a special time for His people to rejoice (Deuteronomy 16:15): "Seven days you shall celebrate a feast to the Lord your God. You shall surely rejoice."

If the Israelites had sat in gloom and misery at the very time God called them to rejoice, it would have been deeply out of place — like mourning at a wedding. When God calls us to thanksgiving and we mix our drink with tears, are we not being deeply ungrateful for His mercy? God wants His people to be humble, but not ungrateful. It is the devil's tactic either to keep us from our duties altogether, or to push us toward them at the worst possible time.

Rejoicing is a duty (Psalm 33:1). But when God by some specific circumstance calls us to weep, joy is out of place. This is precisely what God rebukes in Isaiah 22:12: "On that day the Lord God of armies called you to weeping and mourning — but behold, joy and rejoicing." Oecolampadius and others believe this was during the time of King Ahaz, when signs of God's judgment were clearly visible. To be given to celebration at that moment was

gravely out of season. God says in verse 14: "Surely this iniquity will not be forgiven you until you die." In the Hebrew, this is a forceful oath — as if God declared: I swear it, this will not be expiated by any prayer or sacrifice. The fruit of joy must be brought forth in its season.

Reading the Word is a duty (John 5:39), but this fruit too must be brought forth at the right time. To sit reading privately at home while the Word is being preached or the Lord's Supper is being celebrated is out of season — indeed, it is sinful. As Hushai said (2 Samuel 17:7): "The counsel is not good at this time." One duty should prepare the way for another, not crowd it out. Fruit must appear in its proper season. The great God who has appointed the duties of His worship has also appointed the times. God set a specific time for the Passover (Numbers 9:2-3): "Let the sons of Israel observe the Passover at its appointed time." If the Israelites had been reading the law at home or praying privately during the time of the Passover celebration, it would have been out of season — and God would have treated it as contempt of His ordinance (verse 13): "That person shall be cut off from his people." If a person, whether out of pride or laziness, stays home when public worship is being held — even if he maintains private devotions — he is bearing fruit out of season. Let him know that he will bear the weight of that sin.

Let all trees of righteousness bear timely fruit. In prosperity, be thankful. In hardship, be patient. "There is an appointed time for everything" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). The Psalmist says God appointed the moon for her seasons (Psalm 104:19). If the moon were to shine at noon or the sun at midnight, it would be out of order. The same principle applies in spiritual things.

Consider this to encourage the bearing of timely fruit:

Timeliness gives a thing its value and worth. There are foods we enjoy in season that we have no interest in out of season. We value a kindness shown at the right moment — without that timing, it counts for little. Religious duties performed in their season are truly glorious.

Even animals instinctively observe their seasons (Jeremiah 8:7): "Even the stork in the sky knows her seasons; and the turtle-dove and the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration." Pliny notes that they keep to their schedule of changing climates. Should Christians not also observe their seasons — knowing when to mourn and when to rejoice? Let us not be outpaced in wisdom by the stork and the dove.

Religious duties performed at the wrong time can cause harm. A strong purgative may sometimes be beneficial, but given at the wrong time — when the patient is already weakened and barely conscious — it may kill him. Snow and hail are good for the soil when they come at the right time. But when the grain is ripe, a hailstorm would damage the crop and beat it from the stalk. Mourning in a time meant for joy, or private devotion during times of public worship, is as out of place as a hailstorm at harvest — and no less damaging.

Application 1. This shows us who, in God's accounting, is a true Christian — namely, the fruit-bearing Christian. As soon as the sap of grace is infused, it shows itself in spiritual fruit. The moment Paul was converted, he became a remarkable plant — he produced extraordinary fruit: humility, faith, and a heavenly-mindedness. He was one of the most fruitful trees God ever planted in His vine-

yard. The jailer, once God had changed him from a wild tree into a tree of righteousness, brought forth sweet and generous fruit. How kindly he treated the apostles — setting food before them and washing their wounds (Acts 16:33-34). The man who had been their jailer became their nurse and caregiver. It is impossible for a person to be grafted into Christ — who is so full of life and vitality — and not become fruitful. Whoever is a branch of this tree, though he may have been like Aaron's dry rod before, will now blossom and bear fruit.

Application 2. Here is a charge against three kinds of people.

First, those who bear no fruit (Hosea 10:1): "Israel is a luxuriant vine." He gives fruit for himself. How many fruitless hearers there are — who produce nothing but empty talk, like grain stalks that run all to straw! They give God neither early fruit nor late fruit. Many Christians are like trellises covered only with the leaves of outward profession. They may be compared to the wood of a grapevine — which is good for nothing (Ezekiel 15:2). Whoever lacks the fruit of the Spirit lacks the Spirit. And whoever lacks the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him (Romans 8:9). And if he does not belong to Christ — whose is he? I fear that the sin of this age is fruitlessness. Never has there been more labor in God's vineyard — yet never less fruit. Instead of fig trees and pomegranates, we find an abundance of barren willows. Ministers say they fear their labor is going to waste. Many are drifting further away, few are being genuinely converted. Satan has reaped a great harvest in recent years — but how few are truly and savingly changed? They are like gleanings after the vintage. This is a grief, and it ought to be mourned. To the fruitless Christian, let me say four things.

Fruitlessness is a disgrace. Barrenness in the old covenant was considered deeply shameful. For a tree to be without fruit in winter is no surprise. But to be fruitless in spring and summer is a reproach to the tree. In the dark winter of ignorance and Roman Catholic error, less fruit was less surprising. But in the springtime of the gospel — when the Sun of Righteousness has shone so brilliantly over us — to be fruitless is a disgrace that cannot be wiped away. People consider it a shame to be missing an eye or a limb. It is a far greater shame to be missing fruit.

What account will the fruitless Christian give to God? God will come with this question: where is your fruit? A godly person dies full of fruit (Job 5:26): "You will come to your grave in full vigor, like the stacking of grain in its season." The fruitless Christian comes to his grave not like a sheaf of grain but like a bundle of straw — fit only for the fire. It is wise to consider now what answer we will give to God for our barrenness. The Lord has planted us in rich soil. He may say to us what He said of His vineyard (Isaiah 5:1): "My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones." Hillsides are considered the best ground for vines. The sun reaches them fully and is more effective for ripening the grapes.

"A fertile hill" — in the Hebrew it is literally "the horn of the son of oil" or "son of fatness" — meaning extremely rich, productive soil. So God might say to us: I have planted you on a hillside. You have been placed higher than the nations around you. You have been lifted up almost to heaven with the abundance of gospel ordinances. The sunshine of God's mercies and the refreshing

dews of Zion have fallen on you — but where is your fruit? Your blessings are great. But what have you done with them? Those whom God finds fruitless, He leaves without excuse.

Those who do not bring forth good fruit will never taste the fruit that grows in heaven. Heaven is God's garden, paradise filled with pleasure — where the rarest and most exquisite fruits grow. There are fruits there that even the angels delight to enjoy. It might be said of those heavenly fruits as in Song of Solomon 4:13-14: "Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, henna with nard plants, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all the trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes." How richly fragrant are the fruits that grow in the heavenly Jerusalem! If you do not bring God your fruit, you will never taste His fruit. Those who do not bear the fruit of righteousness will never taste the fruits of paradise. Present Christ with your sweet offering — give Him your myrrh (Song of Solomon 5:2), your spiced wine with the juice of the pomegranate (Song of Solomon 8:2). Your myrrh — that is, your repentance. Though bitter to you, it is sweet to Christ. Those who have no myrrh or wine to offer God will never feed on the tree of life, which bears every kind of fruit (Revelation 22:2).

Consider the heavy judgment that falls on the unfruitful person (Matthew 25:30): "Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness." This man had not embezzled his talent. But because he did not put it to use and bear fruit with it, he is condemned. God will judge people for burying their talents just as He will for squandering them — just as much for bearing no fruit as for bearing thorns. Let fruitless Christians take warning. If God did not cut

down unproductive branches, He would be false to His own Word — for He has declared (Matthew 3:10): "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Second, this charges those who bear evil fruit. They are not trees of the garden but of the wilderness. Their hearts are fertile soil for sin — producing pride, malice, and false religion. Some of their bitter, poisonous fruits are listed (Galatians 5:20-21): immorality, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, and heresies. These are wild grapes (Isaiah 5:2), grapes of gall (Deuteronomy 32:32), fruit that leads to death (Romans 7:5). These are trees of the devil's planting. Let no one say his heart is good while he bears such fruit. You might as well say that because a crabapple tree bears sour fruit, it must have a sweet root. Bad fruit reveals a rotten heart. The fruit identifies the tree (Luke 6:44).

Third, this charges those who bear good fruit but with a corrupt purpose (Hosea 10:1): "Israel is a luxuriant vine — he produces fruit for himself." It is nearly as bad to bear fruit for yourself as to bear no fruit at all.

What does it mean to bear fruit for yourself?

It means doing good only to glorify yourself. When pride worms its way into a person's deeds, it spoils the fruit. Prayer is good — but when a man prays only to display his abilities, he is bearing fruit for himself. Some people take pride in their humbling confessions — which is as absurd as Benhadad's servants being proud when they came before the king with ropes around their necks (1 Kings 20:31). Acts of charity are good — but when a man gives not so much to feed the poor as to feed his own pride, he is

bearing fruit for himself. That fruit is eaten through with worms. God will say to all such self-seekers what He once said to the Jews (Zechariah 7:5): "When you fasted and mourned these seventy years, was it really for Me that you fasted?" Sinners, were you not bearing fruit for yourselves?

Application 3. Let this call all of us to fruitfulness. How blessed it would be if it could be said of us as it was of Joseph (Genesis 49:22): "Joseph is a fruitful bough." We love to see fruitfulness everywhere. If there is a tree in our orchard — however beautiful its leaves — we do not value it unless it bears fruit. Let the precious grapes and figs we bear show that we are trees of God's planting. God has no use for trees that exist only for shade — He loves fruit. Arabia is called Felix — fortunate — because of the sweet fruits that grow there: frankincense and other spices and perfumes. A Christian may rightly be called Felix — blessed — who has the sweet fruits of the Spirit growing in his heart. The ancient pagans had a custom of dedicating trees to their gods — the oak to Jupiter, the laurel to Apollo, the olive to Minerva. But certainly, if we would dedicate a tree to the God of heaven that He would accept, let it be a tree full of the fruit of righteousness. Christians should be like the citron tree which, as naturalists say, bears fruit at every season of the year. When some fruit falls off, other fruit is ripening — and when that ripens, new blossoms are already forming. It is never without fruit. This is a picture of a good Christian. He is never without fruit — either blooming in his affections or bearing fruit in his daily life.

To persuade Christians toward fruitfulness, I ask them to weigh these five considerations.

Fruit is what God expects from us. We are His planting. "Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it?" (1 Corinthians 9:7). Let us not be like Pharaoh's lean cattle, which consumed the fat ones yet stayed lean. Let us not keep devouring sermons and never become any the stronger.

Fruitfulness is one of the clearest marks of a true Christian (Proverbs 12:12): "The root of the righteous yields fruit." Fruitfulness distinguishes a saint from a hypocrite. The hypocrite is all about appearance and show — he has fine leaves. But the root of the righteous yields fruit. Fruit is as inseparable from true faith as moisture from air. It is the very definition of a branch in Christ — it bears fruit (John 15:2). Just as a person differs from an animal by reason, an animal from a plant by sensation, and a plant from a stone by growth — so a true Christian differs from a hypocrite by fruit. Fruitfulness is what separates the sound tree from the hollow one.

But cannot hypocrites also bear fruit?

They do not bear fruit connected to the vine. They produce in the strength of their own natural abilities — not in the strength of Christ.

Hypocrites produce something that looks like fruit — but it is not the right kind.

Their fruit is not as sweet. A crabapple tree can produce fruit just as a fine apple tree can — but there is a great difference in the taste. A hypocrite may pray and give to charity just as a child of God does — but there is a difference in the fruit. The fruit of a re-

generate person is ripe and mellow — sweetened by faith, ripened by love. The hypocrite's fruit is sour and harsh. He does not bring forth pomegranates but crabapples — not figs but wild grapes.

The apparent fruit of hypocrites withers and comes to nothing (John 15:6): "He is thrown away as a branch and dries up." The hypocrite's fruit is like grass growing on a rooftop — it withers before it has a chance to grow (Psalm 129:6; Matthew 13:6).

Fruitfulness adorns a Christian. Fruit adorns the tree. A fruit-bearing Christian is an ornament to the faith. The more fruitful the branch, the more beautiful it is to look at (Jeremiah 11:16): "The Lord called your name a green olive tree, beautiful in fruit and form." A dead tree is not only useless — it is ugly. A Christian adorned with the fruits of righteousness is beautiful and glorious. The fruitful Christian is compared to the lily for beauty (Hosea 14:5). Do you want to be beautiful in God's eyes? Then spread your branches. Send out your fragrance like the aromatic trees of Lebanon.

Fruitfulness is strong evidence to present for heaven. The fruits of love, humility, and good works are, as Bernard says, seeds of hope, signs of election, and happy previews of future glory. Justifying faith is always accompanied by the fruits of righteousness. The person who can show genuine fruit sails toward heaven like a ship loaded with jewels and spices — full sail.

God delights in His fruitful trees. When His garden flourishes, He will walk there. He who curses the barren fig tree will taste of the fruitful tree (Song of Solomon 5:1): "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh along with my balsam."

This also calls those who do bear fruit to bear more. Do not be satisfied with the fruit you have — press on toward greater holiness (John 15:2): "Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit." Grace is like the morning light — it grows brighter and brighter until the full light of noon. Christians should be like the soil in the parable that yielded thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold (Matthew 13:8). A person who has a little gold works to increase it — and is not grace more precious than gold? Some Christians have a small amount of fruit and consider it sufficient — like trees with an apple or two to prove they are the right kind (Isaiah 17:6): "Two or three olives on the topmost bough." They are like the church at Philadelphia which had a little strength (Revelation 3:8) — just a little faith, a spark of love. Christ rebukes even small faith (Matthew 14:31). Christians should grow with the growth that God provides (Colossians 2:19). The apostle prayed for the Philippians that their love would "abound still more and more" (Philippians 1:9).

To urge Christians who do bear fruit to bear more — more patience, humility, love, and so on — consider:

This is the very reason God keeps investing in us — so that we would bear more fruit. The Lord is constantly cultivating us. Not a week or a day passes without His fresh investment, His golden showers of blessing. And why is God at all this effort and expense with us, if not so that we might bear more fruit?

The more fruit we bear, the more glory we bring to God (John 15:8): "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit." It is a blessed sight to see any fruit at all — and I would not discourage those who bear only a little. Even two or three berries are a sign that the tree is still alive. The ground in the parable that pro-

duced more sparingly, Christ still calls good ground (Matthew 13:8). A farmer who sees a thin ear with only a few grains is still glad to see it and will carry it into the barn. Even if you are a thin ear — with less grace than others — God will not reject you. If there is any fruit at all, God will accept it. The servant who gained only two talents received his "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:22). Even if you bear less fruit, you are too good a tree to be cut down for firewood. You will be transplanted into paradise. But I say: do not be content with small beginnings. Work to put more oil in your lamp and increase your store of grace. The more fruit you bear, the more glory God receives. Though the lowest degree of grace may be enough to bring you to salvation, it does not bring God as much glory. Notice this in the text: having said "filled with the fruit of righteousness," the apostle adds "which are to the glory and praise of God." When the plants in an orchard thrive, it reflects well on the gardener and commends his skill. In the same way, when the plants of righteousness flourish, it brings praise to God's glory. To bring glory to God is the highest purpose of any creature. It is better to lose our lives than to lose the purpose for which we live.

The more we are filled with fruit, the more we are like Christ, who was "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), and who received the Spirit without measure (John 3:34). This tree of life was always bearing — producing different kinds of fruit: wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification. The more we are filled with the fruits of righteousness, the more we resemble the Sun of Righteousness. We were chosen for this very purpose — to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:30). And we are most like this blessed vine when we bear full clusters.

The more fruit a Christian bears, the more Christ will love him. Leah said: "Now my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons" (Genesis 29:34). When we bear much fruit, Christ's heart is drawn closer to us. If Christ builds a nest of comfort, He builds it in the most fruitful trees. Though the Lord Jesus accepts the reality of grace in any degree, He commends only the higher degrees of grace (Matthew 8:10): "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel." He set a trophy of distinction on that faith. Christ will pardon weak faith — but He honors great faith. It was not a flicker of love He commended in Mary Magdalene, but love ablaze (Luke 7:47): "She loved much." Christians, do you want to be like that beloved disciple who leaned on Jesus' chest? Do you want much love from Christ? Then give Him much fruit.

Bearing much fruit will bring an abundance of comfort to the soul in two crucial moments.

In the hour of temptation. Satan always goes after the weakest Christian — all his arrows fly in that direction. A powerful temptation may overcome a weak faith. But flourishing faith stands like a cedar and is not blown down by the wind of temptation. Strong faith can silence the devil, that roaring lion (1 Peter 5:9).

An abundance of fruit will bring comfort in the hour of death. A little grace may keep us safe from death's ultimate danger, but a greater degree of grace keeps us above the fear of death. What joy it will be on the deathbed when a Christian can come with full sheaves of grain! When he can show five talents gained through faithful trading! When his lamp is not merely dripping with oil but full of it! Even if the devil shows God our debts, what if we can show Him our fruit? How sweet death will be then! It will not be

destruction but deliverance. Death, like a whirlwind, may blow down the body like a tree — but it cannot destroy the fruit of our graces. The trees of righteousness carry their fruit with them (Revelation 14:13): "Their deeds follow with them." The Christian who abounds in holiness may say with Simeon (Luke 2:29): "Lord, now You are releasing Your servant to depart in peace." He who bears little fruit departs in safety. He who bears much fruit departs in peace.

Consider how much need we still have to keep pressing toward greater fruitfulness. Our graces are still immature. In heaven, this teaching will no longer be needed — we will have finished growing, having reached our full spiritual stature. Our understanding will be clear and our love complete. But while we live here, there is still something lacking in our faith (1 Thessalonians 3:10). So we need to keep increasing our supply of grace and bearing more fruit. Our grace is still dimmed by sin. Our faith is shot through with unbelief. When the sun is in eclipse, it gradually works its way out of the shadow and shines brighter and brighter until it recovers its full light. So it must be with us — we must keep working our way out of the eclipse until we reach our perfect brightness in glory.

The person who does not keep growing in fruitfulness will soon find himself losing ground. He who does not gain more faith will soon have less. Not to advance is to retreat (Revelation 2:4): "You have left your first love." Grace is like fire — if it is not stoked and fed, it will soon burn down. A Christian cannot lose the seed of grace itself (1 John 3:9), but he can lose the active expression of grace and the comfort it brings. So press on to bear more fruit. The moment a Christian stops pressing forward, you can see him starting to drift backward.

The more your fruit increases, the more your glory will increase. The servant whose mina gained ten was made ruler over ten cities (Luke 19:16-17). If you want your crown hung with jewels, let your branches be hung with fruit.

Application 4. The final application is practical direction. Here are some means toward fruitfulness.

Recognize your own fruitlessness. Many people could have become fruitful in grace but for the fact that they already thought they were. The person who thinks he is fruitful enough is barren enough. Be honest about your lack. It is far better to grieve your poverty than to presume on riches you do not have.

If you want to be fruitful, remove the things that prevent fruitfulness.

Nursing any secret sin in the heart. A sin that is kept and harbored is like pests in a tree — it destroys the fruit. Grace cannot thrive in a sin-saturated heart. Some plants will not grow in certain soils. Sheltering sin is what causes grace to wither.

The love of wealth. The worries of the world choked the seed (Matthew 13). The love of sin poisons the fruit; the love of money chokes it. This is like blight on trees — it destroys the precious fruits of godliness. "Do not love the world" (1 John 2:15).

A third means toward fruitfulness is weeping for sin. Moisture helps seeds germinate in the ground — holy tears water God's trees and make them more fruitful. Mary Magdalene — a weeping plant — how fruitful was she in love for Christ! Low, moist ground, like marshland, is the most fertile. The soul that has been moistened and soaked in tears is the most fruitful. David's graces never flourished more than when he watered his bed with tears. When a plant

is pierced and lets out its sap or resin, it bears more fruit and sweeter fruit. The Christian who has been pierced in heart over sin, and has shed many tears because of it, bears the sweetest fruits of grace.

To become fruitful, regularly apply the blood of Christ and rest on His promises.

Apply the blood of Christ. Naturalists say that blood applied to the root of certain trees causes them to bear more abundantly. I am certain that the blood of Christ applied to the heart makes it flourish more in holiness. No one is more fruitful than the true believer (2 Timothy 1:12): "I know whom I have believed" — that was applying the blood to the root of the tree. And how fruitful Paul was in zeal, love for Christ, and courageous endurance (2 Corinthians 12:15)! The person who truly believes that Christ died for him never feels he can do or suffer enough for Christ. When we read the Word and pray, we water the branches. When we believe, we water the root — and that is what makes the tree fruitful.

Apply the promises. Farmers have methods for strengthening the vitality of a plant's root so the tree will bear better fruit. Apply the promises — they strengthen and invigorate a Christian's inner life, and then he puts forth fruit more vigorously. It is observed in nature that watering the root of a pine tree with wine causes it to flourish. God's promises are like wine watering the trees of righteousness — causing them to spread and grow in grace. Keep the inner life of the tree strong if you want it to bear. A discouraged, downcast soul produces less fruit. But when a Christian's heart is warmed and strengthened through the promises, he becomes rich in pleasant fruit — like a tree loaded down with its harvest.

Another means toward fruitfulness is humility. Low-lying ground is most fertile (Psalm 65:13): "The valleys are covered with grain." The humble heart is the fruitful heart. It is observed in some countries, including France, that the best and largest grapes come from the lower-growing vines. In the same way, the largest and finest fruits of the Spirit grow in the humble Christian (1 Peter 5:5): "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Paul called himself the least of all the saints — yet he was the greatest of the apostles. The Virgin Mary thought little of herself (Luke 1:48), yet this lowly plant bore that blessed vine which brought the fruit of salvation to the world.

To grow in grace, make much use of good conversation with other believers (Malachi 3:16): "Those who feared the Lord spoke to one another often." There is an observation about the natural world: some plants grow better near certain other plants than they do alone — as with the myrtle and the olive. The same is true spiritually. The trees of righteousness, when they grow together in fellowship, thrive best in godliness. Fellowship with other believers is an excellent means toward fruitfulness. Christians build each other's knowledge, strengthen each other's faith, and help clarify one another's assurance. When the trees planted in God's orchard stand far apart and grow distant from one another, they bear less fruit.

To be fruit-bearing trees, draw near to the waters of the sanctuary (Jeremiah 17:8): "He will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit." The preached Word will not only make us more knowledgeable Christians — it will make us

growing Christians. Ministers are compared to clouds (Isaiah 5:6). Their teaching falls like rain and makes God's trees fruitful. Those who sit under these refreshing drops are like that flock of sheep (Song of Solomon 4:2) of which every one bears twins and none is barren. A Christian can no more be fruitful without the ordinances of God than a tree can be fruitful without rain.

Finally, if you want to grow quickly in fruit, go to God and ask Him to make you fruitful. God is called the vine grower (John 15:1), and His skill surpasses all other gardeners. Human gardeners can plant and prune trees — but if the tree is dead, they cannot make it bear fruit. God can make the barren tree bear. He can breathe life into what is dead (Ephesians 2:5). It is not Paul's planting but the Spirit's watering that gives the increase.

Pray for God to make you fruitful even if He must do it through affliction. Often God grows us in grace through suffering (Hebrews 12:11): "All discipline for the moment seems not to be pleasant, but painful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." The pruned vine bears best. It is observed that removing some of the blossoms from a tree makes the remaining fruit better — because the sap has less to nourish and can focus on fewer fruit. Some writers have noted that a tree with too many blossoms can actually blossom itself to death. The same principle holds spiritually. God, by removing some of the blossoms of our outward comforts, causes us to bear finer fruit. Some people have blossomed so abundantly in prosperity that they have blossomed their way into hell. There is an old observation that planting tender trees facing the western sun does them harm — that sun is too fierce and scorches the fruit. In the same way, too much prosperity acts like a harsh western sun on Christians,

scorching all genuine affection (Jeremiah 22:21). Pray to God that He would make you fruitful even if it requires cutting you back. Say with Luther: Lord, wound where You will — prune and cut me until I bleed — so that I may bear fruit in holiness and reach my end in everlasting life (Romans 6:22).

THE PERFUME OF LOVE



1 Peter 1:22 — "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart."

Scripture identifies love for other believers as the clearest sign of a person who is bound for heaven (1 John 3:14). And I find Christ and His apostles constantly returning to this theme of love — as if love were the sweetest music and harmony in all of religion. That is what has brought me to this subject.

Every grace has its beauty. But some graces adorn and display a Christian before the watching world more than others — like stars that shine more brightly — and among these, humility and love stand out. These two graces, like precious diamonds, cast a sparkling radiance on the Christian faith. I want to speak of the second of these now: "fervently love one another from the heart." Love is a grace always needed and therefore never out of season — though it is far too often out of practice.

This text, like the river of Eden, divides into four branches.

A command: "love one another."

The scope of love: "one another."

The character of love: "from the heart."

The intensity of love: "fervently."

Love purely — this is the opposite of hypocrisy. Love must come from the heart. It must not be a mere compliment, which is like a painted fire. Pretended love is worse than open hatred.

Love fervently — this is the opposite of lukewarmness. Love must burst into flame. It must not be like smoldering flax but like a burning lamp. The Hebrew word for love carries this meaning — an ardent, passionate affection. Nothing must be allowed to quench it.

Doctrine: Christians must love one another sincerely and intensely (Colossians 3:14): "Beyond all these things put on love" (1 Peter 4:8): "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another." As if the apostle had said: whatever else you neglect, do not neglect this grace. Jerome reports that when the apostle John was very old and too weak to walk, he would be carried into the pulpit. There he would repeat one sentence — "Little children, love one another" — and then be carried out. How we need this grace of love to be engraved in letters of gold on our hearts by the finger of the Holy Spirit!

The question arises: what is love?

Love is a sweet and gracious affection by which we desire and promote the good of another as our own. Love is a sacred fire kindled in the heart by the Holy Spirit — like the fire that came down from heaven (2 Chronicles 7:1). I will strive to keep this fire burning in Christians' hearts — like the sacred fire the Vestal Virgins maintained in Rome — so that it never goes out.

There are several reasons that press this duty of love upon us.

We must love because God commands it (John 13:34): "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another." Love is both a new commandment and an old one. It is old because it is a law written in the human heart by nature itself — as if inscribed with a diamond pen. It is also old because it appears in the ancient statutes of Scripture (Leviticus 19:18): "You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." And yet it is a new commandment.

It is new because it has been cleansed of the distortions the Pharisees put on it. The old version said: love your neighbor. Now it says: love your enemy (Matthew 5:44). Here is a new interpretation of an old law.

Love is called a new commandment also because it comes in a new form — freshly minted by the gospel, reinforced by a new example (John 13:34): "As I have loved you." So love is not optional. It is a duty — both an old commandment and a new one.

The second reason pressing us to love is the excellence of this grace. It is a beautiful grace. All other graces seem dim unless love shines through them. Even faith has no beauty unless it works through love. The tears of repentance are not truly pure unless they flow from the spring of love. Love is the jewel Christ's bride wears. It is the diamond in the ring of the graces. Love is the grace that seasons all our actions and makes them rich. Love is like musk placed among linen — it perfumes everything. So love makes all our acts of worship a sweet fragrance to God (Ephesians 5:2). Prayer is compared to incense (Psalm 141:2). Incense laid on the altar but not set alight does not smell as sweet. The incense of prayer does not give off its full fragrance unless it is kindled by this fire of love. Love is the badge that marks a true saint (John 13:35): "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have

love for one another." Bernard calls love the sweet dew that distills from a Christian and refreshes everyone it falls upon. Love is the golden clasp that binds hearts together. It is the cement that joins Christians to each other. It is "the perfect bond of unity" (Colossians 3:14). If this bond breaks, everything falls apart. Love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:10). All the duties of the first and second tables of the law — reverence toward God and justice toward our neighbors — are summed up in this: you shall love.

How beautifully and richly the apostle Paul expounds and praises this grace of love! He writes with the skill of an orator as much as a theologian — painting love in all its spiritual beauty and glory!

Paul exalts this grace in three ways.

First, by contrast — he shows that the most glorious gifts mean nothing without love. Without love, everything else falls short (1 Corinthians 13:1): "Though I speak with the tongues of men" — even if a man could speak as many languages as Mithridates, who reportedly knew twenty-two different tongues; even if he had the golden eloquence of Chrysostom; even if he could do with his oratory what the poets say Orpheus did with his harp — moving rocks and stones — yet without love it would count for nothing.

More than that, says the apostle: "Though I speak with the tongues of angels and do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Would it not be a magnificent thing to have the eloquence of angels? Yet without love, it would be nothing more than clanging noise. To love as Christians love is better than to speak as angels speak.

"And though I have all knowledge" (verse 2): if a person's mind were a library containing all human learning; if he could know everything that can be known; if he could discourse with Solomon's range — from the cedar of Lebanon down to the hyssop — and have no love, all of it amounts to nothing. Knowledge without love makes a person no better than a devil.

"And though I have all faith, so as to remove mountains" — would it not be remarkable to have miracle-working faith? To move mountains, to cast out demons, to handle serpents and drink poison and not be harmed (Matthew 16:18)? Yet without love I am nothing — I count for nothing before God. The wonders of faith without the mystery of love profit nothing.

"And though I give all my possessions to feed the poor" (verse 3): even if I gave away my entire estate in charity, without love it profits me nothing. It is like a lamp without oil.

"And though I give my body to be burned" and have not love, it is nothing — the fire of martyrdom is worthless without the fire of love.

A person may come to church, pray, and receive the sacraments — but if his heart burns with malice, he is simply going to hell in a more religious-looking way. How precious a jewel is love, says Augustine — how rare a grace — that without it, all other things, however glorious they appear, are in vain.

The apostle also describes this grace of love positively, by laying out its character and excellence.

Love is kind (verse 4). Love is a generous, giving grace — full of good works. It drops like a honeycomb.

Love is not arrogant. Though it is generous, it is not proud. Love is a humble grace — like the violet, which perfumes the air yet bows its head. Love sets aside the trumpet and covers itself with a veil. Love conceals its own worth and says with Paul (2 Corinthians 12:11): "Though I am nothing."

Love does not seek its own (verse 5). The apostle complains (Philippians 2:21): "For they all seek after their own interests." But love seeks not its own. Love is an outward-flowing grace — it spends itself entirely for the good of others. It is reported of Pompey that when there was a severe food shortage in Rome, he had gathered large supplies of grain abroad and loaded them onto ships. When the sailors were reluctant to set sail because of a storm, Pompey himself stepped forward into the storm, saying: it is better that a few of us perish than that Rome go without relief. That was genuine public spirit. Love seeks not its own. It turns a private Christian into a common good. Love is a grace that does not stay at home — it goes out, makes regular visits, looks into the needs of others and helps meet them. Love has one eye closed, to overlook the weaknesses of others, and another eye open, to spot their needs.

Love is not easily provoked. It does not fly into fits of anger. It does not burn with rage. Love is gentle and quiet. It only catches fire in order to warm others with its merciful warmth. It gives honey but does not easily sting.

The apostle also praises love by comparison — placing it alongside faith and hope and then crowning love above them both (verse 13): "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest

of these is love." He weighs love against faith and hope, then sets the crown on love. In one sense, it is true that faith is greater than love.

In the order of cause and effect, faith produces love — and in that sense, faith is the nobler. As Augustine says: though the root of a tree is hidden from sight, all the beauty of the branches comes from that root. In the same way, all the beauty that shines in love comes from the root of faith.

Faith is also greater than love in terms of what it does for us directly. Faith is the more directly beneficial grace — through faith we are grafted into Christ and receive the richness of the vine. Faith draws all the strength and riches of Christ into the soul. Faith clothes the soul in the embroidered robe of Christ's righteousness, in which it shines more brilliantly than the angels. But in another sense, love is greater than faith.

Love is more visible. It is a more outwardly evident grace than faith. Faith is hidden in the heart (Romans 10:9). Love is more obvious — it shines forth in daily life. Love reveals the soundness of faith the way a steady pulse reveals the health of the body. Faith bows the knee to Christ and worships Him. Love opens its treasury and presents Christ with gifts — gold and frankincense.

Love is also greater than faith in that it lasts longer (1 Corinthians 13:8): "Love never fails." We will one day lay aside our bodies of flesh and see God face to face. Faith and hope will be no more — but love will remain. While we live here, we need faith — it is our staff for the journey (2 Corinthians 5:7): "We walk by faith." But we will set that staff down at heaven's door, and only love will

enter within the veil. So you have seen the brilliance of this diamond. With both elegance and divine insight, the apostle has set out the beauty and radiance of this grace.

The third reason pressing Christians to love is that love adorns the gospel — it places a crown of honor on the Christian faith and makes it beautiful in the eyes of the world. It was an honor to religion in Tertullian's day when even the pagans could say: see how the Christians love one another! Psalm 133:1: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes." What a beautiful sight it is to see Christians bound together by the silver cord of love! The church is Christ's temple. The saints are living stones (1 Peter 2:5). How magnificent is this temple when its stones are cemented together with love! It was said of the first temple that no sound of hammer was heard within it. How we need the same — no sound of strife or division within God's church. What is religion but a binding and joining of hearts together? We are bound to God through faith, and to one another through love.

The fourth reason is the necessity of love. Love is a debt — and debts must be paid (Romans 13:8): "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another." The debt of love differs from all other debts.

When we pay an ordinary debt, we receive a receipt and owe nothing more. But this debt of love must be paid continuously — it is never fully discharged. Even in heaven we must keep paying this debt — love to God and love to the saints. There is no release from it.

Other debts can be forgiven. Sometimes a creditor cancels a debt, as in the parable (Matthew 18:27): "The lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt." But the debt of love cannot be cancelled — it must be paid. If we fail to pay this debt, God will come against us and cast us into the prison of hell.

In ordinary financial debts, the more we pay the less we have. But this debt of love works in the opposite way — the more we pay, the more we have. The more grace God gives, the more love flows toward others. Love, like the widow's oil, increases the more it is poured out. Other debts make us poorer as we pay them. This debt makes us richer.

Love makes us like God. God is love (1 John 4:16) — a golden sentence. Augustine says the apostle commends love more in those three words — God is love — than Paul does in his entire chapter on love. Just as the nature of the sun is light, God's nature is love. All three persons of the Trinity are love.

God the Father is love (John 3:16): "God so loved the world." That God would give up Christ from His own bosom — the Son of His love — and lay this jewel as a ransom for our salvation — what unparalleled love! No such love has ever been shown to the angels.

God the Son is love. How Christ loved His bride when He died for her! His side poured out blood; His heart poured out love. Such a vein of love was opened in Him that all our sins could not stop its flow. Love was the wing that carried Christ into the virgin's womb. Christ incarnate — here was love wrapped in flesh. Christ on the cross — here was a book of love laid open before us to read.

God the Holy Spirit is love. His appearing in the form of a dove revealed His nature. The dove, says Pliny, is a gentle creature — it has no gall. What are all the Spirit's movements but offers of love? What is the Spirit's zeal but the stamp of love? Why does this blessed Spirit come like a suitor, pursuing sinners — if not to show that He is in love with them? All three persons of the Trinity are love. And the more we shine in the grace of love, the more we resemble the God of love.

The sixth reason pressing Christians to love is the sweet relationships we share with one another. We are fellow citizens (Ephesians 2:19). We all look forward to the same heaven. We will soon live together — should we not love together now? We are soldiers of the same army (2 Timothy 2:3). Our fight must be the fight of faith, not the fight of quarreling. The only competition among us should be who loves the most. We are branches of the same vine — should we not be united? We are stones of the same building — should we not be cemented with love? More than that, we are brothers (Acts 7:26): "Men, you are brothers — why do you wrong each other?"

Application 1. I could take up a lamentation here — and steep my words in tears — over the decline, I almost want to say the funeral, of brotherly love among Christians. The fire of brotherly love is nearly extinguished. In its place burns the wildfire of passion and strife. I have read of a man named Vitalis who risked his own life to rescue a friend in distress. But such people seem gone from this age. The text says: see that you love one another — but our times have made a poor commentary on it. How Christians reproach, condemn, and slander one another! The text says love fervently — but many hate fervently. Instead of the bond of love, we

see the apple of strife. We live in the frozen zone — the love of many has grown cold. Many seem to have been born on the mountains of Bether — the mountains of division — and baptized in the waters of Meribah — the waters of strife. Even the wicked unite! Even demons joined together — a whole legion was in one man. Will there be more unity among devils than among Christians? Christians, turn your hot words into humble tears! How the enemies of religion mock when they see not only Christ's coat but His very body torn apart.

Consider the damage done when love is absent. The lack of this grace produces division — and division is dangerous.

Division brings disgrace and scandal on religion. It causes the ways of God to be spoken of as evil — as if religion were the source of bitterness and strife. Julian, in his attacks on Christians, said they lived together like tigers — tearing and savaging each other. Shall we by our quarrels and conflicts prove Julian's words right? This will drive others away from the Christian faith. Epiphanius records the story of Meletius and Peter, Bishop of Alexandria — both confessors of orthodox Christianity, both condemned to suffer. While imprisoned together, a minor dispute drove them into such a bitter schism that they divided their cell with a partition and refused to worship Christ together — even though they were both suffering for His name. This division became a scandal and did more damage to the cause of Christ than their martyrdom did good.

Division advances Satan's kingdom. The devil's only hope lies in our divisions. Chrysostom observes about the church at Corinth: when many zealous new believers had been gathered in, Satan saw

no better strategy to block the flow of the gospel than to throw in a bone of contention and split them into factions — one declaring for Paul, another for Apollos, and few truly for Christ.

Application 2. Let Christians be called to genuine and fervent love. See that you love one another. How we need this sweet spice to send out its fragrance among Christians! How we need the Lord to rain down these silver showers of love on Christian hearts — which are for the most part like the mountains of Gilboa, on which no heavenly dew falls. It is said of the stones of Solomon's temple that they were so tightly fitted together they appeared to be one single stone. How we could wish that the hearts of Christians were so sweetly joined in love that they were as one heart.

Let me commend this grace of friendship and love to Christians from two angles.

First, as members of a community. The whole nation is a political body, and it should function like a natural body. All the members of a body work in harmony together, each contributing to the good of the whole — so that there is no division within the body (1 Corinthians 12:25). So it should be in the body of society.

You are members of the body of Christ's church. You bear His name and wear His livery. Therefore you must be joined together in genuine affection. It is a dark and troubling sign when the joints of the same body come loose and the knees knock against each other.

If people will still insist on living in conflict, nurturing a viper at their own chest, I offer two serious considerations.

An unloving person is an unregenerate person (Titus 3:3): "For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy." As if the apostle was saying: before grace arrived, we were full to bursting with this poison of malice. The apostle, describing the natural unconverted state, calls it "the gall of bitterness" (Acts 8:23). The person who lives in bitter strife is still in the gall of bitterness. A malicious person has no family resemblance to God — for God is love. He knows nothing of the gospel at a saving level, for it is a gospel of peace. There is a "bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) and a "bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:23). The person the gospel has not bound in the bond of peace, Satan has bound in the bond of iniquity.

Lovelessness is a leaven that sours the whole lump (1 Corinthians 5:8).

It sours your good qualities. Naaman was an honorable man and a mighty warrior — but he was a leper (2 Kings 5:1). That word "but" was like a dead fly in an ointment — it ruined everything else. In the same way, we might say of such a person: he is a man of ability and strong moral character — just, pleasant, self-controlled. But he is a spiritual leper. He will not love. He pays every other debt he owes — but this one debt he refuses to pay, even if he rots in hell for it. The debt of love. This is a mark of disgrace on him.

Lovelessness also sours your religious duties. You pray and attend church, but you refuse to be tied in the bond of friendship with others. What is all your outward devotion worth? We are told to lift up holy hands without wrath or dissension (1 Timothy 2:8). But the loveless person does not lift up holy hands in prayer — he

lifts up diseased hands, bloody hands (1 John 3:15): "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer." Prayer, says Chrysostom, may be compared to a beautiful wreath of flowers. The hands that make a wreath must be clean. So the heart that offers a prayer must be clean. Anger and bitterness contaminate a Christian's prayers — will the holy God touch them? The unloving person poisons his own prayers. Will the Lord accept a poisoned offering?

Oh that all of this might at last persuade us to genuine and fervent love! Let us turn all our criticizing into praying. Let us pray that God would put out the fire of strife and kindle the fire of brotherly love among us. Let us pray that the Lord would heal our divisions, mend our fractures, and make us like the cherubim — facing one another. Let us pray that God would fulfill His promise that we will serve Him with one consent — or as the Hebrew has it, with one shoulder. And let this be the golden motto written over England: one heart and one way.

Let us be urged, as we seek to show love to all people, to give a special love to those who belong to the household of faith — the saints and people of God. We must love as God loves. He loves most those who are most like Him. He loves godliness even when it comes joined to poverty. So our love should flow most freely toward those who bear God's image and His mark upon them. Joseph loved all his brothers, but he loved Benjamin most. God's people must have Benjamin's portion in our love. The saints are called jewels (Malachi 3:17) — we must value and prize them. They are called the apple of God's eye (Zechariah 2:8) — to show how tenderly they should be regarded by us. The saints are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) — not by being absorbed into the divine essence, but by being conformed to God's likeness. These we

must love with a love of deep delight and affection. They are close relatives of Christ by faith — they carry the royal blood of heaven. They must stand higher in our thoughts and deeper in our affections than others. Jerome loved Christ as he saw Him dwelling in Augustine.

When I say the saints must have the largest share of our love, I do not mean everyone who calls himself a saint — including those who use religion as a mask while committing sin. I mean those the Scripture identifies as saints: those who excel in virtue (Psalm 16:3), those who walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8), those who have — as Bucer puts it — something of Christ in them. These are the ones we must pour our deepest love upon. There is something in true saints that naturally stirs love. They carry the beauty of genuine holiness within them, and they share in the spotless holiness of Christ — which is more than enough to draw our hearts toward them.

But what shall we say about those who, far from loving God's people because they are saints, hate them for that very reason — because they are saints? As Tertullian says, the mere confession of the name of Christ was enough to make a person hated and to be used against him as a charge. Aristides was said to have been banished from Athens simply because he was just. Holiness is the thing the world reproaches and hates. Wicked men, like panthers, want to tear apart the image of God that is drawn in the new man. A person may have every kind of excellence — learning, moral character, godliness. People will admire him for his learning and his character, but they will hate him for his godliness. Holiness has become the crime. The serpent is known by its hissing — those who hiss at true religion are of the seed of the ancient serpent. Let

me speak plainly: there is a general secret hostility in the hearts of unregenerate people toward genuine godliness. They will tolerate religious appearances and keep up a religious form. But those who display a genuine spirit of zeal and holiness stir up their opposition. I say this plainly: there is no clearer sign of a rotten and devilish heart than to hate a person for the very thing for which God loves him — namely his holiness. It is a serious offense to deface a king's statue. What punishment, do you think, will be counted fitting for those who mock and try to destroy the image of the living God? Beware of this. To hate the grace of the Spirit in others comes very close to despising the Spirit of grace Himself. To conclude — let us ask God for a spirit of unity and friendship, that we may love one another, and especially that we may hold in deep affection those who belong to the family of God and whose names are written in the book of life.

THE GOOD PRACTITIONER



John 13:17 — "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

In this chapter, our blessed Savior — the great teacher of the church — is found instructing His disciples. He taught them in three ways.

By direct teaching (verse 34): "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another." Christ was about to leave the world. As a dying father charges his children to love each other, so our Savior gave His disciples this solemn final charge: love one another.

By living illustration (verse 4): He took a towel and tied it around Himself. By this act He was teaching them through a vivid picture how He had wrapped Himself in our human flesh. The holy angels stood amazed, wondering how the divine nature could be bound together with the human.

By personal example (verse 5): He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet. He taught them humility through His own action, stooping to the lowest kind of service. He washed His disciples' feet and did it for them to imitate (verse 14): "You also ought to wash one another's feet." Having taught His

disciples through instruction, visual symbol, and personal example, our Lord Christ then draws the practical conclusion in the words of our text: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

This text deserves to be engraved in letters of gold on our hearts. Taken seriously, it will help us draw true benefit from every other text. A sermon is never truly heard until it is practiced. I want this message, by God's blessing, to serve as the selvage edge — the border that keeps all the rest from unraveling. The most helpful sermon would be one that helped you put all the other sermons you have heard into practice.

By the words "these things," our Savior broadly refers to all the matters of religion — though He has most immediately in mind the two things He had just spoken about: love and humility.

In the text there is: 1. A condition — "if you know and do."

2. A blessing — "you are blessed." From this the doctrine arises: it is not knowing the truths of religion but practicing them that makes a person truly happy. If Christ had said, "If you know these things, you are blessed" and stopped there, we might have concluded that knowledge alone was enough for happiness. But Christ does not stop there — He adds: "You are blessed if you do them." Christ does not locate happiness in knowing but in doing. The teaching is clear: it is not knowledge but practice that makes a person truly blessed.

This teaching has two parts, and I will address them in order.

1. Knowledge alone of the truths of religion will not make a person happy.

2. It is the practical living out of religion that makes a person happy.

Knowledge alone of the truths of religion will not make a person happy (Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46): "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" Merely reflecting on the most glorious truths cannot bring a person to heaven. Even if a person could discourse on every possible subject, and his mind were a treasury of wisdom and a vast ocean of learning — as was said in an exaggerated way of Albinus, Beringarius, Hermolaus Barbarus, and others — none of that could make him truly happy. His knowledge might earn him admiration, but not blessedness. A person could know all the workings of government, all the strategies of commerce, all the intricacies of the arts, the whole system of theology — and none of it would crown him with true happiness.

To be clear: theoretical knowledge of religion has a beauty that comes close to the pearl of grace. This gold is precious. Knowledge enriches the mind — it is a beautiful thing to behold. But like Rachel, who was beautiful yet barren and cried out, "Give me children or I die" — if knowledge does not give birth to the child of obedience, it will die and amount to nothing. I am not at all dismissing knowledge. Knowledge is the guide that directs our obedience. Zeal without knowledge is mere willful worship — it is setting up an altar to an unknown God. Knowledge must lead the way into obedience. It is as offensive to God to offer the blind as to offer the lame. Ignorance in the end damns the soul (Hosea 4:6): "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." The Hebrew word means to be cut down like trees — so knowledge is genuinely necessary. Knowledge is the older sister, but obedience is better than knowledge. Here the older must serve the younger. Knowledge may put

us on the path to happiness, but only practice actually brings us there. I will prove that knowledge alone cannot make a person happy with three demonstrations.

Knowledge alone does not make a person better — therefore it cannot make a person happy. Pure knowledge has no inherent power. It leaves no spiritual mark of holiness behind. It informs — but it does not transform. Knowledge by itself has no power over the heart to make it more holy. It is like a weak medicine that does not work. It does not warm the affections or cleanse the conscience. It does not draw the virtue of Christ to dry up the bleeding wound of sin. A person may receive the truth with intellectual understanding but not with genuine love for it (2 Thessalonians 2:10). The apostle calls this a "form of knowledge" (Romans 2:20). Knowledge alone is a dead form with nothing to animate it. The person who has only knowledge is spiritually stillborn — he looks like a Christian but has neither hunger nor movement. Knowledge alone produces religious monsters — all head and no feet. They do not walk in Christ (Colossians 2:6). A person may have knowledge and still neglect his duty — as Plutarch said of the Greeks: they knew what was right but did not do it. A person may have knowledge and still be ungodly. He may have a bright mind and a filthy heart. The sun can shine while the road is muddy. A person's understanding can be enlightened while his feet walk in unholy paths. If knowledge apart from practice does not make a person better, it cannot make him happy.

Knowledge alone will not save — therefore it cannot make a person happy. If knowledge alone could save, then everyone with knowledge would be saved. But that is not true. By that logic, Judas would be saved — he had knowledge enough. The devil

would be saved — he can disguise himself as an angel of light, and he is named for the vast knowledge he possesses. A person can have knowledge and be no better than a devil. Hell is full of well-informed minds. If knowledge alone will not save, then it cannot place a person in a state of true blessedness.

Knowledge alone makes a person's situation worse — therefore it cannot make him happy.

Knowledge removes every excuse (John 15:22): "Now you have no excuse for your sin."

Knowledge also increases a person's condemnation: "Woe to you, Chorazin! It will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you." People who have never heard the gospel will be better off than Christians who lived in open contradiction to the knowledge they had. Luke 12:47: "That slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes." Knowledge without practice serves only as a torch to light people's way to hell. The brighter the light, the hotter the fire. If a king issues a royal proclamation and a subject knows about it but refuses to obey, his knowledge of it only makes the king more furious with him. The king will punish it as deliberate contempt. It is better to be ignorant than to knowingly disobey. If knowledge alone makes a person's situation worse, it is the very opposite of making him happy.

By all means pursue knowledge — but do not stop there. Will you settle for something that cannot make you happy? What does it help to cry out "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord"? What good is it to accumulate knowledge and never put it to use? In this sense, "the one who increases knowledge increases sorrow"

(Ecclesiastes 1:18). His knowledge will serve only to condemn him. If knowledge apart from practice could make people happy, England would be a remarkably happy nation — it is not lacking in knowledge. The light of the gospel has never shone more clearly since the days of the apostles. But here is the problem: most people know merely to know. The same may be said of people generally as Seneca says — "*malint disputare quam vivere*" — they would rather argue well than live well. They want knowledge to impress others rather than to transform themselves. Alas, knowledge alone will never make them happy. People may build their nests among the stars and still make their bed in hell. They may wear a crown of knowledge and be condemned by God. Christian, if all you have is knowledge — in what way do you surpass a hypocrite? In what way do you surpass the devil? The devil knows all the articles of the creed. He could say to Christ: it is written. Is it not a sad thing if a person has no better evidence for heaven than the devil has?

How empty is an overabundance of unused knowledge! The person filled with nothing but knowledge is like a glass filled with foam — what a vain, foolish thing it is to have knowledge and put it to no spiritual use! It is like having several fountains in your garden but never using them to water your flowers. Or like a donkey loaded with feed that never eats from it. Many a person carries a great deal of knowledge around with him but never feeds on the sweetness of it or works his knowledge down into the practice of his life. Knowing merely to know is like a person who studies maps of foreign countries and can describe them in detail but has never traveled there or tasted the spices those places produce. The religious expert has heard and read much about the beauty of holiness but has never actually traveled into it, never tasted for himself how

good the Lord is. What does it help to have the Bible in your head if it is not in your heart? Can doctrines comfort you when you come to die? To conclude this point: a person cannot rightly be called a Christian based on his knowledge alone. You would not call a person a craftsman if he never worked at his trade. A man may be ever so skillful, but you do not call him a goldsmith if he has never refined a vessel or assayed gold. Though a man has knowledge of surgery, you would not call him a surgeon if he has never lanced a wound or dressed a sore. In the same way, it is improper to call a person a Christian if he has knowledge but no practice. He knows he should put sin to death — but he does not. He knows he should show mercy — but he does not. He has never once worked in the trade of godliness.

I come now to the second part of the teaching: it is the practical living out of religion that makes a person happy. Knowledge without practice is like a beautiful garden arbor with no fruit. The practice of religion is the noblest skill. The lifeblood of religion flows through the veins of obedience. Here I will show: 1. why there must be practice; 2. why it is only the practical side of religion that makes a person truly happy.

Why must there be practice? Because practice alone answers God's purpose in giving us His Word — both written and preached. Leviticus 18:4: "You shall do My judgments and keep My ordinances to walk in them." Deuteronomy 26:16: "This day the Lord your God has commanded you to do these statutes and judgments; you shall therefore keep and do them" — not only know them, but obey them. God's Word is not only a rule for knowing — it is a rule for doing. When you speak to your children and tell them your wishes, you expect not just that they will know them, but that they

will act on them. God gives us His Word not only as a picture to look at, but as a model to copy. A master gives his servant a candle not to gaze at, but to work by. The light of Scripture is meant to guide our feet into obedience. David calls God's Word not a lamp to his eyes but a lantern to his feet (Psalm 119), showing that the light of the Word is meant for walking, not merely for seeing. God gives us His Word as His will and testament, entrusted to us so that we will carry it out. If God had only wanted His laws to be known or discussed, He could have taught them to parrots. If He had only wanted them preserved, He could have engraved them with an iron pen on a rock forever (Job 19:24). But He delivered the records of heaven to human beings so that they would be obeyed. The Lord gives us His precepts as a physician gives a patient his prescriptions — to be taken and applied. All of God's instructions exist so that we will put them into practice, purging sin and bringing the soul into a healthier condition. God gives us His Word as a mother gives a child the breast — not merely to look at, but to draw from. Many have gone to hell with the breast in their mouths because they never drew from it and turned the milk of the Word into spiritual nourishment.

That it is only the practical side of religion that makes a person truly happy is clear when we consult both Scripture and reason.

Scripture makes this plain — it knows no path to happiness except practice. Psalm 15, final verse: "He who does these things will never be shaken." Calvin's comment on that verse is worth noting: the Psalmist does not say "he who knows these things will never perish" — he says "he who does them." Being a doer of the Word is what gives a person a claim to blessedness. James 1:25: "This man

will be blessed in what he does" — not for his doing (as some wrongly interpret it), but in his doing. Obedience is evidence of blessedness, not its cause.

Search the Bible from beginning to end, and you will find the crown always placed on the head of obedience. The great saints of the past always received their commendations and titles of honor for their obedience: Moses was described as mighty in words and deeds (Acts 7:22); Cornelius as a man who feared God and gave generously to those in need. When Christ pronounces the sentence of acceptance, notice how it reads: "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom; for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink" (Matthew 25:34-35). At the last day, Christ does not reward people for their knowledge — He rewards them for their deeds. Revelation 22:12: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." If Scripture points to no other road to happiness than practice, it is pointless to look for it anywhere else.

Reason confirms this as well. Happiness cannot be reached apart from the use of means, and using means requires practice. Salvation must not only be sought through knowledge — it must be worked out through practice (Philippians 2:12). There is no crown without running, no reward without diligence. If happiness comes only through the use of means, then it cannot be reached or even imagined without practice.

Application 1. If only the doing side of religion makes a person happy, then this sharply rebukes those who know much but do nothing — people who talk about God but do not walk with God. People pursue knowledge because it is considered impressive.

They want to wear this showy flower in their cap — but one leaf from the tree of life is worth more than the whole tree of knowledge. It is better to practice one truth than to know them all. Most Christians fall short here. Like Rachel, they have bright eyes, but they are barren. Mephibosheth suffered a fall and was left lame (2 Samuel 4:4). Since Adam's fall, people are lame in their walk — they do not live in the paths of obedience. People know that covetousness is a sin. The Greek word for it describes an excessive craving — like Midas, who wished that everything he touched would turn to gold. Many sins grow from this root (2 Timothy 3:2). Yet people keep living in it, never cured of this dry thirst (Amos 2:7): "those who pant after the dust of the earth." People know that swearing is a sin — the land mourns because of it (Jeremiah 23:10). Sinners throw their oaths around freely, and God sends a flying scroll against them (Zechariah 5:2-3). Yet they will not give it up. They know that drunkenness is a sin. There is death in the cup — yet the drunkard drinks it down. People know that sexual immorality is a sin (Exodus 20:14). It wastes their strength, destroys their reputation, wounds their conscience, harms their children, and damns their souls (Revelation 22:15). Yet they pursue it anyway, burning with lust even as they head toward hell.

People know they should throw themselves into the duties of religion with energy — yet they are content to leave those duties undone. They know they should put sin to death, pray with their families, deal honestly with others, and give generously to the poor. But if someone had no Bible other than the lives of most people, they would not know these duties existed. For the most part, people never change. What they were twenty or thirty years ago, they are still — just as proud and unreformed as ever. The best

tools have been worn out and broken on their rocky hearts, yet they remain as uncut and unpolished as ever. The bellows have burned out, the lungs of God's ministers have been exhausted — yet how much worthless silver still remains in so many of our congregations. If only those who do the Word are truly happy, how few will be saved?

But why do so few rise to the practical side of religion? The answer is a lack of genuine brokenness over sin. The person who has truly felt the weight of conviction sees himself as though surrounded on all sides — the sea of his sins before him ready to swallow him up, and the justice of God behind him ready to overtake him. He cries out as Paul did (Acts 9:6): "Lord, what do You want me to do? Do You want me to repent — to believe? I am ready for whatever You command." The truly humbled sinner does not argue — he obeys. The seed that had no depth of soil withered and came to nothing (Matthew 13:5-6). The reason people do not bring forth the fruit of obedience is that they have no depth of soil — they have never been genuinely broken over their sin. A proud person will never obey. Instead of trampling his sins underfoot, he tramples God's law underfoot (Jeremiah 43:3-4). The person who bows in humility is the most likely to bow his neck under Christ's yoke. The person who sees himself within an inch of hell asks the jailer's question: "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). What will a condemned man not do for a pardon?

Lack of practice also comes from lack of faith (Isaiah 53:1): "Who has believed our report?" This is why sermons are like showers of rain falling on rock — they neither soften nor produce growth — because people are partly unbelievers. They would rather debate than believe. Those who live as skeptics die as athe-

ists. If people truly believed sin was so bitter, that wrath and hell followed in its wake, would they take this serpent into their arms? If they truly believed there was beauty in holiness — that godliness brings real gain, that there is joy along the way and heaven at the end — would they not turn their feet toward that path? People have passing, shallow thoughts about these things, but their minds are never fully convinced and their consciences never fully gripped by the truth. This is Satan's masterpiece — his dragnet by which he hauls millions to hell by keeping them in unbelief. He knows that if he can keep people from believing the truth, he will certainly keep them from practicing it.

People's reluctance to practice also comes from the difficulty of it. It is easy to hear a truth, to give it some mental agreement, to admire it, to profess it. But to work a truth down into practice — that is hard. And people are overgrown with laziness (Proverbs 19:15). They are unwilling to put themselves to much trouble. Can people dig for gold and yet not dig for the pearl of great price? Can they exert themselves in the pursuit of their sins, and yet refuse to exert any effort for the saving of their souls? I am bold enough to say: many a sinner expends more sweat and labor on his lusts than a saint expends in serving his God.

The world also gets in the way. The thorns choke the seed of the Word. People are so caught up in the world that they have no time for better things. The world is like a mill — it makes such a racket in worldly hearts that it drowns out the sound of God's gentle call. Sometimes a person's heart is kindled by the preaching of the Word, and we begin to hope the flame of godliness will break

out in his life — but then the world moves in and smothers the fire. How many sermons lie buried in earthly hearts? More die there than are ever recorded in any bill of mortality.

How deeply the lack of practice in this age ought to grieve us. This is a cause for mourning. Many who call themselves believers are all ear. If we were to see a creature made up of nothing but a single ear, it would be a freak of nature. How many such freaks exist in Christianity? They hear and hear and are never the better for it — like the salamander, which lies in fire but, as naturalists say, is never burned by it.

Some people satisfy themselves simply with having religious ordinances available to them (Judges 17:13): "Then Micah said, 'Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, since I have a Levite as priest.'" But what good is medicine if it is never taken? What does it help to have the sound of the Word in your ears if you have no taste of it in your heart? It will be cold comfort on a deathbed to remember that Christ was preached in your streets and that you sat under gospel ministry your whole life — when your conscience tells you that you lived unholy and unchanged. Such people entered God's house as the animals entered the ark — they came in unclean, and they went out unclean.

Application 2. This calls everyone to become a true practitioner of religion. There are three steps leading toward heaven: knowledge, agreement, and practice. Taking the first two steps is not enough — it is the third step that leads to true happiness. Obedience is the great command of both the law and the gospel. In obedience lies a Christian's duty, and in it lies his joy. 1 Samuel 15:22: "To obey is better than sacrifice." It is pleasing to God, and it is the true mark of a Christian. What makes a thing excellent if

not its usefulness? What are a bird's beautiful feathers if it cannot sing? What is a plant covered in leaves if it bears no fruit? What do we actually praise in a horse — his appearance or his strength? Song of Solomon 5:5: "My hands dripped with myrrh." We may apply this: it is not only a Christian's lips that should drip with knowledge — his hands and fingers must drip with myrrh as well, doing the works of obedience.

Let me offer some compelling reasons to draw Christians toward the practice of godliness.

Gospel obedience is evidence of genuine faith. As Christ said in another context (John 10:25): "The works that I do testify about Me." Though no one ever spoke as Christ did, when He submitted Himself to examination, He pointed not to His words but to His works — they testify about Me. In the same way, it is not a Christian's eloquent words that bear witness to his faith — it is his works. Psalm 119:59: "I turned my feet to Your testimonies." David did not merely turn his ears to God's commands — he turned his feet toward them. He walked in them. We do not judge a man's health by the color in his cheeks but by the pulse in his arm, where the blood is really moving. In the same way, we cannot judge a Christian's spiritual condition by his knowledge or impressive words — that is just surface color. Saul can be found among the prophets. The true measure of a Christian is taken from how he actually lives in obedience to God.

Practicing religion will not only benefit you — it will benefit others. A godly life honors religion and spreads it.

It honors religion. The gospel may be compared to a beautiful queen. The fruitful lives of those who profess it are the jewels that adorn her and make her shine with greater glory. What an honor it was to the faith when the apostle could write that the Romans' faith was being celebrated everywhere (Romans 1:8): "I thank my God that your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world" — that is, faith flowering into obedience. 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3: "We give thanks to God for you all, remembering your work of faith and labor of love." Christians should be eager to uphold the reputation of their faith.

The practice of what we know is the most powerful argument we can make to others — it confirms them in the truth of religion. The Emperor Jovinian said to the orthodox and Arian bishops: "I cannot judge your doctrine, but I can judge your lives." Their practice would preach more loudly than anything else. If others see us profess one thing and live the opposite — if they hear Jacob's voice but see Esau's hands — they will conclude that religion is nothing more than pious ceremony or clever social strategy. Why does a father tell his children not to swear, when he himself swears? If you want to draw others to faith, be a doer of the Word. Say as Abimelech said to his men (Judges 9:48): "What you have seen me do — hurry and do the same." Do you want to be a magnet drawing your children and servants toward heaven? Live a life of genuine holiness. Basil observes that Julian, in one of his letters to Arsacius, wrote that the Christian faith flourished largely because of the holiness and generosity of those who practiced it.

Obedience also shows our love for Christ (John 14:21): "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me." We often say to someone: if you love me, do this. This ought

to be a powerful motivation to obey — by the very love you have for Jesus Christ, obey His Word. Everyone wants to be thought of as loving Christ. But test your love by this standard: are you shaped by the gospel? Do you obey? It is an empty claim for a person to say he loves Christ's person while he ignores Christ's commands.

Without practice, you will fall short of people who themselves fell short of heaven. Herod did many things (Mark 6:20) — in many areas he practiced what John preached. Those who rest in the intellectual side of religion alone do not measure up even to Herod.

What immeasurable comfort obedience brings — both in life and in death.

In life: is it not a comfort to review your accounts and find that your trade has been profitable? You come to the means of grace — the Word and prayer — to trade for heaven. If you take an honest accounting and find that you have gained in the business of godliness and are filled with the fruit of the Spirit, will that not be a great source of comfort? The person who is full of good works — God will gather the fruit and bless the tree.

Obedience also brings comfort at death. What joy it was for Paul when he came to die, to make that sweet declaration (2 Timothy 4:7): "I have kept the faith" — meaning he had held to the doctrine of faith and had lived the life of faith. What peace a Christian can have in laying his life down, when he has spent his life in service to God. This was the deathbed comfort of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:3): "Remember, O Lord, I beg You, how I have

walked before You in truth." A person may regret years of fruitless knowledge. But no Christian who is going to rest with God has ever regretted walking with God.

What is the purpose of all God's dealings with us but to produce obedience? What are all God's promises but invitations to obey? What are all God's warnings — standing like the angel with a flaming sword — but calls driving us toward obedience? Deuteronomy 11:28: "A curse, if you do not obey." What is the voice of mercy but a call to duty? A father gives his child gifts to cultivate gratitude and devotion. The heat under a distiller draws out the fragrance of the roses. The warmth of God's mercies is meant to draw the sweet water of obedience out of us. Mercy, as Ambrose says, is a medicine God applies to cure our barrenness. What are all the examples of God's judgment on the disobedient but alarms to wake us from laziness and stir us into action? God's discipline applied to others is a pointer directing us toward obedience. If God does not achieve His purpose — which is our obedience — we will not achieve our purpose, which is His glory.

Consider how serious a sin disobedience is. This is a sobering verse (Jeremiah 44:16): "As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you."

Disobedience is:

A sin against reason. Can we stand in defiance against God (1 Corinthians 10:22)? "Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?" It is like thorns forming up in battle array against a fire. Will the sinner try to match strength with the great God? What Solomon says about laughter (Ecclesiastes 2:2) can equally be said of rebellion — it is madness.

Disobedience is a sin against fairness. We receive everything from God — in Him we live and move. Is it not right that since we live from Him, we should live for Him? Justice means giving to each what is rightfully owed. Is it not fair and proper that since God supplies our daily needs, we should give Him our loyalty? If a commander pays his soldier, that soldier is obligated to march at his order — not only by military law, but by basic fairness.

Disobedience is a sin against conscience. God is our Father by creation, and so conscience itself binds us to our duty (Malachi 1:6): "A son honors his father. If then I am a Father, where is My honor?"

Disobedience is a sin against our own vows. We have taken an oath of loyalty to God. Psalm 65:1: "My vows to You I must perform, O God." We have made many vows: our baptismal vow, our vow at the Lord's Supper, our national vow, and the vows we made from sickbeds. These are four cords drawing us toward obedience. If we slip these sacred knots and throw these cords aside, will God not call us to account for breaking our word? If oaths will not bind us, God has chains that will.

Disobedience is a sin against our own prayers. We pray: "Your will be done." When we do not obey, we contradict ourselves — we live in direct conflict with our own prayers. A person who contradicts himself is self-condemned.

Disobedience is a sin against God's kindness. It is an ungrateful sin — it is kicking back against His compassion and despising the riches of His goodness (Romans 2:4). This is why the apostle links these two together (2 Timothy 3:2): disobedient, unthankful. Ingratitude stains sin with a deeper crimson. One writer calls in-

gratitude the breeding ground of all other sins — it is sin in concentrated form. Brutus's betrayal wounded Caesar's heart more deeply than the stab of a knife.

Disobedience is a sin against nature. Every creature in its own way obeys God. Living creatures obey Him. God commanded the fish to deposit Jonah on shore, and it did so immediately (Jonah 2:10). What are the birds' songs of praise — as Ambrose calls them — but offerings of obedience?

Even inanimate creation obeys God. The stars in their courses fought against Sisera (Judges 5). The wind and the sea obey Him (Mark 4:41). Even the stones, if God commissions them, will cry out against human sin (Habakkuk 2:11): "The stone will cry out from the wall, and the rafter will answer it from the framework." If people had kept silent, the very stones would have testified about Christ (Luke 19:40). At Christ's death the rocks split open (Matthew 27:51) — that tearing was a proclamation to the world that the Messiah had been crucified. Shall every creature obey God — except man? Christian, think it through: if God had made me a stone, I would have obeyed Him. Now that He has made me a rational being, shall I refuse? That refusal is against nature itself. The only beings that disobey God are people and the devil. Do we really want to find our company there — with the devil?

Disobedience is a sin against self-interest. Disloyalty is treason, and treason exposes the sinner to the wrath of God. 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8: "The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." The person who refuses to obey God's will in His commands will certainly obey His will in His judgments. The sinner, while he thinks he is slip-

ping free from the cord of obedience, is actually braiding the rope of his own condemnation. You have now seen the sin of disobedience displayed in all its terrible colors. "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be instructed, O judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and kiss the Son, that He may not become angry." Kiss Christ with the kiss of love. Kiss Him with the kiss of loyalty. "When His wrath is kindled only a little, blessed are all who take refuge in Him" (Psalm 2, final verse).

Consider the reward of obedience (Psalm 19:11): "In keeping Your commandments there is great reward." Obedience is crowned with happiness — as the text says: "you are blessed." If this argument does not move you, what will?

But what kind of happiness?

Every kind of blessing is poured on the head of obedience — as the precious oil was poured on Aaron's head.

Earthly blessings (Deuteronomy 28:3-4, 9): "Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground; blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl" — if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God. The person with a fruitful heart will have a fruitful harvest. God will cause him to prosper. His basket will not only be full — it will be blessed. God will bless what he has. It is not only the sack full of grain, but money found in the mouth of the sack.

Spiritual blessings (Exodus 19:5): "If you will indeed obey My voice, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples." You will be His portion, His jewels, the apple of His eye. He will give kingdoms as a ransom for you. Jeremiah 7:23: "Obey My

voice, and I will be your God." He deeds Himself over to you as a gift. What an extraordinary, distinguishing mercy this is. Psalm 144:15: "How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord."

Eternal blessings (Hebrews 5:9): "He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" — a salvation dated from eternity. Who then would not fall in love with obedience? In pleasing God, we are filled ourselves. We may be tempted to ask, like Amaziah (2 Chronicles 25:9): "But what about what I give up?" Brothers and sisters, you lose nothing by obedience. Who ever kindled a fire on God's altar and walked away empty (Malachi 1:10)?

Let me set out some principles to help Christians in their obedience, so that it may rise to God as a pleasing offering.

Obedience must have these four qualities.

It must be heartfelt (Deuteronomy 26:16): "The Lord your God has commanded you to do these statutes and judgments; you shall therefore keep and do them with all your heart." Romans 6:17: "You obeyed from the heart." Obedience without the heart is like fire on the altar with no incense — the form is there, but the fragrance is absent. The heart is the seat of love, and love is what gives every act of obedience its sweetness. The heart is what makes service a voluntary offering rather than a tax. Cain brought his sacrifice but not his heart — it was more like paying a fine than making an offering. Without the heart, religion is like angels taking on lifeless bodies. Those bodies could eat, drink, and walk — but they had no soul. They moved, but they did not truly live. How many people merely go through the motions of religion. Obedience without the heart is hypocrisy. "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me?" (Judges 16:15).

Obedience must be comprehensive — it must extend to all of God's commandments (1 Kings 9:4; Luke 1:6).

But who can achieve this?

Though we cannot keep all God's commandments in a perfect legal sense, we can keep them in a gospel sense. A true Christian:

Agrees with the rightness of every command (Romans 7:12): "The law is holy and righteous and good." He sets his seal of agreement to every law.

He takes every command seriously. David gave his attention to all of God's commandments (Psalm 119:6) — his eye was on all of them. Every command carries such authority for a Christian that he does not know how to make excuses for disobeying it. He may fail in every duty, but he dares not willfully neglect any duty.

A child of God desires to keep every command (Psalm 119:5): "Oh that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes!" Where a child of God lacks strength, he makes it up in desire (Romans 7:18): "The willing is present in me." The renewed will bends toward all of God's commands.

The godly soul grieves that he cannot do better. When he fails, he weeps (Romans 7:24): "Wretched man that I am! What an unbelieving heart! How weighed down I am by corruption! The good I want to do, I do not do." A child of God mourns his failures and judges himself for them. And this, in a gospel sense, is to keep every law.

Hollow hearts, as they are careless in their obedience, are also selective. They excuse themselves from certain duties and allow themselves certain sins. "In this one thing, Lord, pardon your servant" (2 Kings 5:18). The hypocrite walks in some of God's statutes

— but not all. He is like a lame horse that will not put all its feet properly on the ground but favors one. There are such lame Christians who limp along and excuse themselves in certain areas, even at the hazard of their souls. Herod would sooner die than give up his sin. True obedience is universal. As it is said that we owe the church unlimited submission, so in truth we owe God unlimited obedience.

The third quality of true obedience is faith (Hebrews 11:6): "Without faith it is impossible to please God." This is why Scripture calls it "the obedience of faith" (Romans 16:26). Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain because he did it by faith. Faith is the animating principle. Without it, all our acts of service are dead — which is why Scripture speaks of dead works (Hebrews 6:1).

But why must this thread of faith run through the whole fabric of obedience?

Because faith looks to Christ in every act of service, and so both the person and the offering are accepted (Ephesians 1:6): "accepted in the Beloved." We are not accepted through our duties themselves, but through the Beloved. Faith looks to Christ's merit to remove guilt, and to Christ's Spirit to cleanse the impurity that clings even to the most sincere worship. In this way, faith secures acceptance.

The high priest under the old covenant pointed to Christ in everything. When he offered the sacrifice, he laid his hand on the head of the animal being slain — a gesture that pointed forward to the Messiah (Exodus 29:10). In the same way, faith lays its hand

on the head of Christ in every act of gospel worship. His blood cleanses, and the sweet fragrance of His intercession perfumes our offerings. Faith looking to Christ in every duty finds acceptance.

Faith not only looks to Christ — it unites us to Christ, as a branch is grafted into the tree. Believers are part of Christ. Christ and His people make one body together. No wonder, then, that God looks with favor on the offerings that believers bring to Him.

The fourth quality of obedience is that it must be constant (Revelation 2:26): "He who keeps My deeds until the end — to him I will give authority over the nations."

Faith must lead at the front, and perseverance must hold firm at the rear. There is always more for a Christian to do, and he must not stop working until the night of death closes in.

Mnason of Cyprus is described as an old disciple (Acts 21:16). What an honor to be a veteran in the faith — gray-headed in the service of God. What a tribute when it is said of someone: "His deeds of late are greater than at first" (Revelation 2:19). A true Christian is like wine full of spirit — good to the very last drop. A skilled painter produces his finest work at the end. Blessed is the person who, the closer he draws to death, moves all the more swiftly toward his heavenly home.

THANKS FOR READING



If you spotted a typo or have feedback, the email is **sam@goodsoilapps.com** — or use the in-app feedback form in *Christian Reader*.