

## JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

### *B. THE AMBASSADOR.*

#### **15. A sound of distant thunder.**

**Matthew 17:22,23.** Back in Galilee, Jesus had more serious news for his closest friends, his chosen twelve. Not only was he going to die, he told them, but he would be delivered into the hands of his killers by a traitor in their ranks. Aghast, they were hardly conscious of his final statement, that he would be raised to life on the third day: this latest development just filled them with grief.

#### **Love beyond duty.**

**Matthew 17:24-27.** The annual temple tax, required of every male 20 years of age and older, was used for the upkeep of the temple – such as lambs for sacrifice, offerings of wine, flour and oil, incense which was burned every day, costly hangings and robes of the priests which were always wearing out, including the robe of the High Priest which alone was said to be worth a king's ransom. The levy of half a shekel was about 2 days' pay. It was a point of national pride, but also one of controversy: the Sadducees disapproved and the men of Qumran paid it only once in a lifetime. Jesus, as the Son of the Lord of the Temple, was technically exempt and so had no obligation to pay it. But what was Jesus' attitude? He could have been independent and so alienated the majority of patriotic Jews. Instead, he submitted to the levy in order not to give any offence that would prejudice his mission. That word "offend" in **verse 27** has the implication of putting a stumbling block in the way, and in doing this Jesus set an example for Christians in their relationship with the outside world. We are obliged to submit to legitimate laws passed by the ruling powers for the benefit of society in general: this is as much a witness to the grace of God at work in our lives as any sermon we might preach.

#### **What Price One Child?**

**Matthew 18:1-14.** It was true the 12 disciples loved their Master. They also loved themselves. To ask Jesus who of them would be the greatest shows how little they really understood the nature and purpose of the kingdom of heaven as being more than a status platform.

For answer, Jesus called to him a little child and set him on display as an object lesson. This alone was enough to boggle the minds of any who were there, for in Jewish society children (especially girls) had no social standing in the community, no legal rights and no importance. Once the disciples' attention was riveted on this astounding "show and tell" Jesus uttered some sombre words - "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," (let alone be the greatest!) The way to greatness, he went on, is through humility. God is a God of grace, but we cannot come to Him except on His terms; unless we humble ourselves even to the lowliness of children, we cannot even enter the kingdom of heaven. Like a child, we must come to God in humility, dependence and trust: our salvation cannot be earned: it can only be accepted humbly as a gift of grace. And this humility before God must be the hallmark of the Christian's attitude to his fellow-men: we are all equal in God's sight – equal in our guilt, equal as recipients of grace, and no-one has the right of preference over anyone else.

Moreover, Jesus continued in **verses 5 and 6**, we adults have a responsibility towards children. Far from ignoring them, we must welcome them in the name of the Father who loves them: we must encourage them, actually listen to them and be ready in love to direct them. We look out on our world with sadness when we see children exploited in so many ways: Jesus warned of a stiff punishment for any who causes children such grief. The "large millstone" is not the small stone used by housewives to grind some grain at home, but the larger and heavier stone turned by a donkey: Jews feared and hated the sea, and to be cast into its depths shackled to such a stone would be the worst imaginable punishment for them, yet a lesser punishment than awaited those who blocked the way for a child to know the love of God! Jesus continued his warning in **verse 10** that children were

never to be despised, the actual wording being “all God’s little ones”: each individual child is supremely valuable to God, enough for Him to assign His angels to their care!

*On the positive side, these verses can be a wonderful encouragement for parents, Sunday School teachers, Brigade leaders, even those who care for toddlers in creche or have a kind word for the little ones at church. Such ministry to children is a ministry to Christ! Don’t get annoyed at the noisy little restless ones: let them see in you the love of their heavenly Father. And with “children” we can include “new believers in Christ” who need just as much our help, encouragement and understanding in the life they are seeking to live for Him.*

We could think that Jesus was talking of our own century when he said in **verse 7**, “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!” Sin in his sight was so horrendous that it would be better to lose a part of your life if that part should lead you into sin, because sin is what separates us from God and leads to an everlasting fate enduring the fires of hell. By the way, if you are tempted to think there is no such place as hell, Jesus himself believed in it – in fact, surprisingly, he spoke more of hell than of heaven!

But what should you do if you become a victim of someone else’s sin? Jesus’ direction is in **verses 15-20**: *don’t gossip about the person behind his back, but confront him directly, gently and in private.* If he cannot see that he has done wrong, take one or two friends along next time and talk the matter out in the light of their opinions. If he is still not convicted, it is time to make the matter public by telling the whole church – and if he refuses to admit his error, accept the fact that your fellowship with him must be broken. However, as Jesus went on, this plan hopefully will bring a resolution: a broken relationship can be restored, and ratified in heaven, but the important thing is to commit the situation to prayer, for the friends who pray together in God’s name for a return to unity will surely be heard by Him. Even in the unpleasant process of discipline, Jesus assured his hearers, God will be in the midst of His children with His love and grace and forgiveness.

### **What a good boy am I!**

**Matthew 18:21-35.** It may be that Peter was pricked by that teaching and sought to prove his godliness by asking Jesus a question – so becoming the forefather of conscience-stricken folk who do the same today. His query sounded so generous: whereas the rabbis taught that men should forgive 3 times at the most, his magnanimous offer stretched right up to 7 times. But if he was hoping for approval from Jesus, his hopes were dashed. Jesus had stern words for him. The kingdom of heaven was not about vengeance but about forgiveness – unlimited forgiveness – just as God has extended to us His unlimited forgiveness. After all, how much real forgiveness would there be in his heart if he was ticking off the times he had left?! It is interesting to compare **Genesis 4:24**: Lamech tells his wives that, where Cain was to be avenged 7 times, Lamech would insist on 77 (or 70 times 7) times. Here Jesus called for a forgiveness that does not count up the wrongs, but offers itself freely and continuously, even as God offers us His forgiveness without limit. Whether the sum in mind was 77 or 490, the idea is of a qualitative, not a quantitative, approach.

Jesus then proceeded to drive his point home by telling a story, and he prefaces it, once again, with the words, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” The debt the man owed the king would amount today to \$100 billion dollars – there would be not the slightest hope of him ever being able to repay it. The debt his fellow-servant owed to the man would be about 3 months’ wages for a slave – payable, though with difficulty. That is the difference between our sin before a holy God and the hurts received from our fellow-men. We are all guilty before God: in His great mercy He does not merely give us extra generous terms for re-payment – He cancels the debt completely! Surely we can do no less than to forgive fully and freely anyone who has done us wrong: nothing men can do to us can in any way compare with what we have done to God. Jesus ended his story with a grim warning: the unmerciful servant was cast into prison, to be tortured, with obviously no hope then of ever being able to repay his debt. In effect he was saying, “If you have such little understanding of the grace of God, my heavenly Father has no choice but to sever His relationship with you.”

*Actually, on the purely human side, unforgiveness only serves to compound the original hurt the victim received. How many lives have been soured and ruined by bitterness in the victim's heart of which the perpetrator is unaware? Psychologically it just isn't worth it! The cure for bitterness is in our awareness of the grace of God and of our acute need for His forgiveness for ourselves. Forgiveness towards our fellow-men brings with it a strength and peace that is straight from God and is priceless.*

### **Till Death Us Do Part?**

**Matthew 19:1-12.** Jesus now left Capernaum for the eastern side of Jordan: his disciples needed a lot more teaching and Jesus needed the time and opportunity to give it to them. But he could never escape for long: large crowds followed him and with them the Pharisees, keen to test him and force him into a slip-up. The question they asked, seemingly in all innocence, was calculated to open a can of worms. In Jesus' day the whole matter of divorce was a vexed and burning issue and here the Pharisees were trying to drag Jesus into the widespread controversy. Marriage itself was held in higher view than in any other nation: it was a sacred duty and it was said that "when a husband and wife are worthy the glory of God is with them." In a world where the Greek social system was based on relationships outside of marriage and Roman morality was corrupt, the Jewish laws of marriage and of purity aimed very high, and ideally divorce was hated.

However, between the ideal and the actuality there was a tremendous gap. In the eyes of Jewish law a woman was a thing, not a person. She was the possession of her father and then her husband and had no legal rights at all. Most Jewish marriages were arranged by the parents or professional match-makers. The girl was often only a child when she was engaged to a man she had never met, although there was a safeguard given, in that when she came to the age of 12 she could repudiate her father's choice of husband.

But in matters of divorce the general law was that the initiative always lay with the husband: a wife could never initiate the process. Again there were safeguards: a man who divorced his wife for any reason other than flagrant immorality, had to return her dowry, thus putting the brakes on irresponsible divorce. This all sprang out of a law laid down by Moses in **Deuteronomy 24:1**, that if a man's wife "becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her", he could write her a certificate of divorce and send her away with it. The certificate was a simple, one-sentence statement that the husband dismissed his wife.

That sounds straightforward enough, but being Jews everyone wanted their own definition of "something indecent". The school of Shammai made it quite clear that "something indecent" meant fornication and that was the sole allowable cause for divorce. The school of Hillel however interpreted the words in the broadest possible sense until it included burning her husband's dinner, going around with unbound hair, speaking to men in the streets or even if she was a brawling woman whose voice could be heard next door! This thinking was open to corruption of course: one rabbi, Akiba, even went so far as to say that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman more beautiful! The result of all this was that the marriage bond was often lightly held and divorce on the most trivial grounds was tragically common.

So it was with this situation that Jesus was faced when the Pharisees asked for his views on divorce. His answer was skilfully direct and included the rebuke, "Haven't you read ....?" Jesus took them back to the very beginning, the ideal of creation, when God created man and woman for each other and for no one else, their union complete and unbreakable. Divorce for Adam and Eve was impossible, and it was wrong, as **Genesis 2:24** says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

"But what about the revered Moses?" The Pharisees countered. "He gave us the law that a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away." Moses permitted that because of the hardness of your hearts," Jesus answered, "but that was not the original law, which allowed for divorce only in the case of a woman's moral impurity."

*It has been said that a nation is only as strong as its families, and moral corruption inevitably leads to its downfall. Can you see this in history, and in the present day? Marriage is God's idea and we foul it up at our peril: yet a godly marriage is the epitome of joy and fulfillment.*

### Deja-vu?

**Matthew 19:13-15.** We could wonder if the disciples needed their ears syringed. Despite Jesus' recent teaching on the place and value of a child, here they had the temerity to rebuke parents who came to Jesus for prayer and blessing on their children. It was usual for parents to bring 12-month-old babies to a rabbi for him to bless them: in this story there could have been fathers coming with their children, as well as mothers. For them to come to Jesus they must have recognised his authenticity and had the confidence that he could impart a blessing as well as any rabbi. In response to the disciples' rebuke Jesus had his own rebuke for them: **Mark 10:14,15** says "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant" with his disciples and added the stern warning, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." However busy he was at the time, he took the children up in his arms and blessed them.

*Do you have children of your own, or who are in your care? Have you "brought them to Jesus" for him to bless? You can do no higher service for them, and they in turn can teach us how to receive the gift of God with an honest faith and acceptance of His love which is beyond human understanding.*

### A Poor Rich Man.

**Matthew 19:16-30.** Matthew tells us that this man was young, Luke adds that he held high office in the Jewish religious community, and Mark agrees that he had great wealth, and was blameless in character. Mark indicates he was earnest enough to forsake all dignity, running up to Jesus with his question and falling on his knees before him. But he was asking the wrong question – "What good thing must I *do* to get eternal life?" He was thinking in terms of actions, of keeping rules and regulations, of piling up credit with God by keeping the works of the law. He knew nothing of the grace of God, given freely to those who love Him.

In answer, Jesus pointed him to God, the source of all goodness – the "good thing" he needed to do was to follow the commandments of God. The young man immediately wanted to know which particular commandments and it is interesting that Jesus listed those which dealt with man's duty to man. Blithely the man answered that he had kept all those from his youth up.

**Mark (10:21)** tells us at this point that Jesus looked into those questing eyes and *loved him*. Jesus could see behind the façade the hunger, the dissatisfaction, the longing for that "something" that was missing from his life. And Jesus gave him a test on his own ground: was it really love, love for man and love for God, which had prompted his religious observance? Jesus knew what was missing, and put his finger on it with his challenge – "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." In effect Jesus was saying, "You have tried to attain to righteousness by your own efforts, but you know you haven't succeeded. You are bound by your possessions, which are more important to you than your love for God. If you really love God and your fellow-man, give those possessions to those who need them more than you do, and then you will be free to come and devote yourself without reserve, to me." It is important to note that in this invitation, Jesus was equating himself with God: to follow God was to follow Jesus.

But this challenge to faith and commitment was too much: the young man could not face it: a mark of his genuine longing was that he went away sad. He would have been even more sad if he had realised how much he had just lost, for saddest of all was the fact that, even loving him as he did, *Jesus did not follow him!* Jesus might have run after him with an offer to "lower the bar" in his special case – but he did not. Jesus has the right to offer us his life, his love, his forgiveness, on his terms, but if we turn that offer down, Jesus will not pursue us. That is the grim result of our repeated rejection of him.

Jesus was sad too. “How hard it is,” he sighed, “for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” That was an astonishing notion to the disciples: wealth in that culture was always regarded as a sign of God’s blessing. They could have drawn the logical conclusion that they didn’t have a hope in the world! Jesus corrected them: “What you think is impossible for man to do, is absolutely possible with God.”

Anxiously and selfishly Peter queried, “We have left everything to follow you. So what’s in it for us?” Jesus could have replied that anyone who followed him with that attitude was not really following him at all. Instead he graciously promised his disciples that, though they may have to wait for the rewards of serving him, such rewards will far outweigh any sacrifice made along the way. As Barclay puts it, “He who shares Christ’s warfare will share Christ’s triumph. He who bears the cross will wear the crown.”<sup>1</sup>

**Matthew 20:1-16** To drive the point home, Jesus followed on with a parable about a landowner who hired workers for his vineyard. The grape harvest ripened towards the end of September, and soon after that the rains came, which meant a race against time before the grapes got spoilt. Any worker was welcome, even if he could only give one hour to the work. The pay of one denarius was the normal day’s wage for a working man. The market-place was Palestine’s equivalent of the labour exchange and the men were obviously desperate, to have stood there all day hoping for a job. The landowner understood the plight of these hired labourers – the lowest class of workers - and in his generosity gave them a whole day’s wage without breaking any agreement with those he had hired first.

*Jesus had this message of God’s universal grace for his disciples, both then and now. As we stand before a holy God we are all equal: whatever our abundance or lack of virtues, talents, and opportunities of service for Him, through His grace we will each receive the undeserved but infinitely precious reward of eternal life.*

<sup>1</sup>The Gospel of Matthew Vol.2, The Daily Study Bible, William Barclay. Page 243