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INTRODUCTION

Most of the books written about the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, have two overriding themes; they describe WHAT happened during His brief stay on earth and use this to draw some conclusions about WHAT we should do, to take advantage of the salvation that He offered us. No one can deny the importance of these themes in our lives. I was exposed to them as a child and had them drummed in my little ears once I began asking my parents questions about God. They are the themes that I heard in church as I grew up. I have to admit that they taught me many things about God. When I began to teach in Sunday school, I used them to teach the children how to believe in God. They were also the main themes I used during the fifteen years I spent preaching in our churches.

Despite this, I always felt there was something missing. Every time I heard that God did this or did that, somewhere in the back of my mind lurked a persistent question I didn't dare ask anyone. Why did God do that? With this why question unanswered, I felt that my knowledge of God was incomplete and the image I was given of Him had big gaps and sometimes some irreconcilable discrepancies. For instance, why did God ask the Israelites to destroy the nations whose land He was giving to them (Josh 6:17), when He is the one who said, "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor the children be put to death for their fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deut 24:16)? Is this the God described in the Bible as a loving father? Or why did He burn Sodom and Gomorrah with all its inhabitants including children and babies? What sin did these commit to deserve death? Or, why did God order His prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute, not once, but twice? Does this make sense?

Over the years this question did not fade away, but stayed with me. As my knowledge of the Bible grew, I discovered the reason most people avoid the question why, is because God, by and large, did not reveal to man the reasons behind his commandments or orders. When He asked Abram to leave his relatives and friends and follow Him to make him a

great nation, He did not tell him why he had to travel and leave everything as a condition for making him a great nation. He just told him, and Abram obeyed. Or when He rejected Cain's sacrifice, He did not tell him why. He just rejected it. Or, why did He wrestle with Jacob? The Bible does not tell us why. Then I discovered another reason. We are taught we should not try to understand God, because our intelligence is inadequate to understand Him. For some time I did not question these two ideas.

But as I learned, the only way to God is to form a personal relationship with Him. I found it difficult, because I really did not understand Him that well. The big gaps in my knowledge of Him began to upset me. I realized if some of these gaps were filled, I would have an easier time relating to God. So I began looking into the writings of the saints, and found some which dealt with this aspect of God's character. Then I began using these. Then applying whatever knowledge I had about God, I tried to probe the why questions. I approached this task with a great deal of humility, and prayer. Realizing this would help me to have a more complete picture of God, and hopefully, would help me in forming a stronger personal relationship with Him, I decided to proceed.

Before I began, I asked God for help, and He did. If you ask me whether He helped in every case, I must confess He did not. There are some situations that are still a mystery to me, but many others have been solved. As a result, I felt relief that many of the nagging questions and inconsistencies in my image of God had been answered. It occurred to me that putting this in a book might help others who have an inquisitive mind like mine. If you ask me whether it is useful to try to understand God, I would say yes. But if you ask me, whether it is possible for us to understand everything God does, I must say no. In the cases we cannot understand, we have to accept what He did in good faith. This becomes a little easier to do, if we know what we can know about Him. If we remind ourselves that He loves us so much that His only son took flesh and became a man, and died in our place so we can live, we will be more willing to accept some of His deeds without understanding them.

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CHAPTER ONE

JESUS' MIRACLES

1. THE MIRACLE AT CANA

Jesus is invited to a wedding

Cana a was a small Galilean village about nine miles from Nazareth. It was the home of Nathanael, one of the twelve disciples. Nathanael, who most probably had another name, is called by this name only once in St. John's gospel. He is usually referred to by his other name, Bartholomew. In this small village, a joyful event was about to take place, a wedding in which a young man and a young woman were about to be joined in holy matrimony. Jesus accepted the invitation, signaling His approval of what about to take place and honoring the institution of marriage with His presence. By attending, He was also saying, and telling us today, that such social events are good for they remind us that living with others in peace and love is one of the ways God wants us to live.

The Sociable Jesus

The Lord's attendance indicated His socially oriented personality. This contrasts with that of John the Baptist who lived most of his life away from people in the wilderness. When he came back out to meet them, he exposed their sinful lives, asking them in harsh language to repent or face dire consequences. While John was fiery and aggressive, Jesus was gentle and meek. But neither was accepted. Reflecting on this, Jesus told His listeners, "With what shall I liken the men of this generation? They are like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another, 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist came eating no bread, and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking; and you say,

'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and of sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children" (Lk 7:31-35). He said this to show that they had rejected John's message based on their judgment of the messenger and not on the merits of the message itself. And despite the fact that John's personality and approach were almost opposite to His, they were also rejecting Him and His message.

Beside the social implications that our Lord's presence in the wedding made evident, He also knew that that wedding would be the occasion where He was to perform His very first miracle. This was the miracle in which He changed water into wine to spare the groom embarrassment. Here again, the Lord demonstrates His ability to identify with His beloved man, and shows His willingness to help to spare someone even the shame of embarrassment.

Only St. John one of the four gospel writers who wrote about Jesus' life mentions this miracle, which signaled the beginning of His ministry. He wrote that Jesus and His mother were invited to the wedding. Many Bible scholars believe that it was the wedding of a relative of the Lord, most probably someone from the Clopas family, who was married to St. Mary's sister. His disciples accompanied Jesus. While everybody was having a good time, suddenly they discover that they are out of wine. The groom may have been a person with limited resources, or the number of people that showed up may have been far more than he had planned for. A possible reason is the fact that Jesus' disciples came with Him and they may have not been expected.

They have no wine

Anyway St. Mary, sensing the embarrassment of the groom, wanted to help. The normal solution for such a problem is to quickly send someone to buy more wine, or borrow some from a neighbor or a relative. But St. Mary did not do this; instead she went to her son. What made her do this was certainly her unwavering faith that He was not an ordinary son. He was not only her son, but also the Son of God. She knew that He could solve the problem, so she approached Him

telling Him in a hushed voice, "they have no wine". When Jesus heard this, He answered, "Woman, what have I to do with you, my hour is not here yet" (Jn 2:4). Some may interpret this as a lack of respect on the part of Jesus toward His mother. But in those days children, especially adults, did not use the word "mom" or "mother" to address their mothers, but used the word "woman", which carried the same respect as the other two.

As we think about the rest of His statement we wonder, what did He mean by it? He definitely knew that she was asking Him to do something unusual, and that she expected a miracle. So He was probably telling her that according to His itinerary, He did not plan to begin performing miracles yet. This is the only possible explanation. What was St. Mary's reaction? She behaved as if she did not hear what He said, and told the servants to do whatever He told them to do.

Is there intercession?

Let us pause here to reflect on St. Mary's response. First, it seems that she knew that she had a special place in her son's heart. Even if it was not in His plan to perform miracles yet, because she asked Him, He will do something. This is a clear case of intercession. The Lord did something because His mother asked him. This raises one of the important questions in Christianity; does God accept intercession or not? Our brothers the Catholics say yes, while our brothers the Protestants answer with an emphatic No.

They say that anyone who commits his life to the Lord, becomes a saint, and consequently does not need anybody to intercede on his behalf. They cite what St. Paul wrote in his epistle to Timothy, when he said, "And there is one God, and one mediator between man and God, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5). As we examine this critically, we will find that the claim that anyone who commits his life to God becomes an instant saint cannot stand the test of reality. How many people who commit their lives to God eventually abandon Him? From our observations, we find many that belong to this group. In the parable of the sower, our Lord talks about those who accept the word

of God but abandon it as soon as any dire consequences befall them because of it. Others allow the word to grow, but worldly concerns, the love of the world and the things of the world, suffocate the word and render it fruitless.

Even the so-called angels of the seven churches, to whom the Lord sent messages in the book of Revelation, show that this can happen to anyone if it happened to them. We find that one of them "has abandoned the love that he had at first". Then The Lord tells him, "Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first" (Rev 2:5). And we find another to whom the Lord said, "I have a few things against you, you have some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put stumbling blocks before the sons of Israel, ...repent" (Rev 2:14). And we find a third, to whom The Lord sends the following message, "I know your work, you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were hot or cold. So because you are lukewarm, I will spew you out of my mouth" (Rev 3:15). So it becomes evident that any person, who commits his life to God, needs to do few things before he can be called a saint. First, he has to maintain his commitment; he has to stay the course. And since Satan will wage a war against him to persuade him that he is taking the wrong road, he has to fight this and win. He has to stay faithful to God, doing his best to obey His commandments.

As a result of this life full of struggle, featuring one battle after the other, in which man wins some and loses some, we attain a degree of closeness to God, which can be called a degree of sainthood. And since people show different degrees of diligence, perseverance, and tenacity during this struggle, they attain different degrees of closeness to God. Every Christian, who chooses to follow the Lord, would rejoice if it were true that all would be saints of equal status. But it is wishful thinking to think that I am equal to St. Paul in our spirituality. St. Paul himself wrote that, "A star outshines another in glory".

The quote from the epistle to Timothy used to prove that Jesus Christ is the only one mediator between man and God, refers to one kind of intercession, which we call atoning intercession. Obviously no one

can play that role except Jesus. He is the only one, who offers us salvation from our sins by dying on the cross, so we can have eternal life. The other kind of intercession is what we call, the pleading, or the asking intercession. This happens when someone asks God on behalf of another.

There are many examples of this intercession in both the Old and the New Testaments. Out of these many examples, a few stand out due to the circumstances in which they happened. The first of these is the famous dialogue that took place between God and Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah. After God told Abraham what He intended to do, Abraham said, "Will You indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city, will You then destroy the place, and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked" (Gen 18:23). If God did not allow intercession, He would have told Abraham, to mind his own business. But God did nothing of the sort. He answered Abraham that He would spare the place if there were fifty righteous people. Abraham sensing that He did not object to his intercession, proceeded with his next offer of forty, and when this was accepted he lowered the number to twenty, and finally to ten. If this is not intercession, what is it?

Many examples come from the life of Moses. Once, Miriam rebelled against Moses because of his marriage to the Cushite woman. When she was punished by instantly becoming a leper, Moses interceded on her behalf, asking God to heal her (Num 12:13). After his intercession, God healed her but she was excluded from the camp for a week, a mild punishment administered by God, because of His great love for Moses. Another episode that shows a strong case of intercession happened when the Israelites made a golden calf and worshipped it while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments. God's anger was kindled against them and He wanted to destroy them. But when Moses interceded on their behalf, the Bible tells us that, "God repented of the evil that He thought to do to His people" (Ex 32:14).

There are literally hundreds of episodes in which saints, prophets, and others interceded on behalf of somebody who offended God for one reason or another. The fact that holy people have performed miracles, gives testimony to the reality of intercession in the life of the church. When this happens, it is not the holy person who heals or does whatever he is asked to do. What happens here is, because of their special relationship with God they ask Him on behalf of others for a specific act, which He does because of their intercession. The Bible tells us to pray for one another. Is this intercession or not? Of course it is.

Just give your problem to God

Going back to Cana, we mentioned the fact that St. Mary told Jesus only what the problem was, "They have no wine," she told Him. She did not suggest a specific solution, but left it up to Him to deal with the problem anyway He wanted. Do we do that when we pray about a given problem? Most people not only ask God to interfere, but they suggest a specific solution, which they want God to comply with. They don't realize that by doing this, they are trying to impose their solution to the problem on God, a solution that may not be according to His will.

God wants us to go to Him with our problems. He even invited and encouraged people to come, when He said, "Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:27). He told us to come to Him that is all. He did not say come loaded with suggestions as to how you want me to give you rest. I will do it my way. All you need to do is come with faith in my ability to solve whatever problem you are suffering from. This is part of what is often referred to as "surrendering one's life to God", and is an accomplishment which eludes many people who commit their lives to Him, and which represents an advanced degree of spirituality that not everyone can attain.

To Drink or Not to Drink

Now we turn to another issue that this miracle brings to the foreground, the issue of drinking. Jesus changed water to wine. Some people conclude from this that He has put his seal of approval on using alcoholic beverages, since wine has a certain percentage of alcohol. These people strengthen their claim by referring to what St. Paul wrote to Timothy, when he said, "No longer drink water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Tim 5:23). As we think of this problem in the world today, we find that drinking has become one of the severe social problems that we have not been able to overcome. Many people have fallen victims to this monster we call alcohol, and have destroyed their lives and the lives of others, simply because they could not stop drinking.

These are the people who are most likely to use the above arguments to justify their own drinking. As we try to answer them, we find their claim has nothing to support it. Time and again, we find statements in the Bible that condemn heavy drinking. We really do not need quotations from the Bible to prove that, due to the obvious consequences of heavy drinking. We all know that it affects judgment, reasoning, and even speech and movement. In short it robs us of our humanity.

How many disasters happen each day as a result of drinking? How many homes are destroyed because of it? How many people are killed because somebody under the influence decided to get behind the wheel? How many wives are abused and brutalized because their husbands are addicted to alcohol? We know that God does not approve of any of those consequences, and therefore cannot approve the cause of those calamities. But despite the clarity of the case, we will provide a few quotes from the Bible that prove that God does not approve of heavy drinking.

First the Bible mentions two kinds of alcoholic beverages; wine and strong drink. Wine, which is supposed to have much less alcohol than strong drink, is permitted as long as it does not produce drunkenness. So we find that Isaac drank the wine that Jacob brought to him with the food that his mother cooked, before, thinking that he was Esau, he

blessed him. We also find that Melchizedek brought out wine to honor Abraham. We even find it in what King Solomon wrote on God's tongue, when he said, "Come eat of my bread and drink of the wine that I have mixed" (Pr 9:5). This is by no means a blanket endorsement of the use of wine, because when a lot is consumed it has the same effect on man as the strong drink.

When Noah planted a vineyard and made wine and drank a lot of it, he uncovered himself and lost his dignity in the eyes of his son Ham. As to strong drink, the Bible definitely condemns it. King Solomon writes, "Wine is a mocker, a strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is lead astray by them is not wise" (Pr 20:1). Also God ordered a few people to abstain completely from drinking altogether. When the angel announced to Manohah's wife that she was to bear and give birth to Samson, he told her, "Therefore beware, and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean" (Jud 13:4). John the Baptist did not drink, as the Archangel Gabriel told his father when he announced his birth. He said, "for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink" (Lk 1:15).

It is not drinking, but getting drunk, which is not approved by God and society. This leads us to the final question, which often comes up when this topic is discussed. Many young people ask, "Why is drinking condemned while light drinking of wine has always been acceptable both in the eyes of society and God?" The answer to that is simple. Since alcohol is a habit-forming drug, some people using even small quantities will get hooked and eventually become addicts. Unfortunately we do not know who among our young people has the tendency to become an addict, and who does not. This is why we tell them, don't touch the stuff, you may be a potential victim to alcohol.

Another reason for our stand against drinking is that because it is a habit-forming substance, those who use it, need it in order to satisfy their craving for it. The danger here is that the amount needed gets bigger and bigger with every use. This often puts a heavy financial burden on the addict, whose income has sharply declined, or disappeared altogether. This has driven many to steal or kill to buy

what they need. As this continues, the addict becomes so dependent on it, that he abandons all his other obligations and becomes totally consumed in how to get enough just to survive. Isn't this slavery, even slavery of the worst kind? Our Lord said once, "If the son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed" (Jn 8:36). Many people interpret this to mean freedom from sin, because it is written that, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (Jn 8:34). I couldn't agree more. But we have to add to this any kind of slavery, whether to sin or anything else is something that God does not want us to suffer from. So, alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, cocaine, caffeine or any other habit-forming substance is frowned upon and its use definitely judged as below our dignity as Christians.

2. FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND

The importance of this miracle from the human point of view is evident in that it is the only miracle mentioned in each of the four Gospels. Another unique feature is that this is the first time something was done for a large group of people. Those who dreamt of the day that Jesus would lead them to overtake the Romans also viewed it favorably. Before this, they had observed Him deal with people on a one on one basis, but with this miracle, they observed Him handle thousands of people. They saw Him as an able administrator, giving clear orders to His disciples and assuming a leadership role they had not seen before. They also observed how He mesmerized the masses by what He told them, to the extent that they had stayed with Him a good part of the day listening, paying no attention to their physical needs nor feeling the passage of time. This was a clear demonstration of His influence over the people, an influence they thought important when the time would come for them to wrest power from their oppressors.

It is always interesting to describe the circumstances in which the Lord did something noteworthy. The Bible tells us that before He fed the multitude, His disciples had just come back from their first mission, and they had a lot to tell Him. With them also came few of

John the Baptist's disciples who told Him the sad news about John's death. They knew John had a special place in the Lord's heart, so they all felt, especially the Lord, a need to retreat to the wilderness for rest, reflection, and meditation.

They soon discovered that they would have no time for themselves. As they reached the place they had chosen, an enormous number of people had followed them. This was a surprise for the disciples, who were probably frustrated, missing a rare chance to be with the Lord alone and away from the people. But the Lord was ready not only to be with them and heal their diseases; He was also ready to talk to them for hours about the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is interesting to note that the church fathers have arranged for this miracle to be in the Gospel reading several times every year. The reason is the fact that it is such a rich episode and can teach us several lessons in our relationship with God.

Dismiss the People

The Bible tells us that as the Lord continued to teach the multitude, the disciples were watching. They noticed that the day was about spent, and shortly it would be dark. They also knew that the people had not eaten since morning and feared that if the Lord continued to speak until dark, and then dismissed them, that many, especially the women and the children, would faint on their way home. So far, they should be commended on their insight and alertness. But when they went to the Lord, there is nothing in their behavior that merits any commendation. When they told him dismiss the people, they committed their first mistake of the day. They assumed that they only were aware of the situation and that the Lord was not. Up to this point, the disciples were unaware of the fact that Jesus is God, and that He is not only keenly aware of the present, but also the future.

The second mistake they committed was that they not only told the Lord about the problem, but they also prescribed the solution, their solution. We can do that with our fellow humans, but we cannot do

that with God. St. Mary did not make that mistake when she approached Him in the wedding at Cana. She reported the problem, but refrained from suggesting any specific solution. She instructed the servants to do whatever He told them to do and realized that she could not dictate to Him what to do. But the disciples thought about the problem, and thought the best solution was for Our Lord to stop preaching and dismiss the people so they could buy food for themselves in the neighboring towns. Some of us may fault the disciples for what they did, while we, very often, make the same mistake. Many when they pray, not only tell God their problems, but also ask Him to solve them their way.

By doing this they are asking God to conform to their agenda. They are really telling Him, "Let it be according to our will, not Yours." By doing this, we deny God His sovereignty, and ask Him to use His supernatural powers to grant our desires and wishes. It is no wonder that God does not honor many of our requests; He refuses to be used by man. This is not the relationship that He wants to have with us. He wants us to tell Him about our problems. As a matter of fact, He invited all human beings to unload all their problems on Him, when He said, "Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).

He did not promise to give us rest on our terms, He promised it on His terms. He wants us to realize that since He loves us so much and there is a huge difference between His capabilities and ours, we have to gladly submit to His authority. If we surrender our lives to Him, He will be able to take care of us the best way there is.

You Give Them Something to Eat

As soon as Jesus heard His disciple's suggestions, He asked them to give the people something to eat. The disciples must have looked at each other in disbelief. They must have asked themselves, "Why is He asking us to do something He knows we cannot do?" They probably felt that He might be under the illusion they had brought food with them, so they gave Him a report about what they had. After this, they

hoped He would realize the wisdom of their recommendation, and follow it. So they told Him that all that they had were five loaves of bread, and two fish, and then added, "but what are these among so many?" (Jn 6:9).

As we think of what the Lord asked His disciples to do, some wonder, "Why did He ask when He knew beforehand that they were unable to do it?" The reason is that He wanted to put them through a test. To pass the test, they should have responded to the Lord's order saying something like this, "Give all these people something to eat? You know, and we know Lord, that we can't, but we know that You can. You provide the food, have us handle the mechanics, and everything will be fine." But they failed the test, and instead of relying on the Lord's powers to provide, they began to consider buying food, as the answer to the order that they received from Him. They even began to compute the cost of the bread that they will need, let alone anything else that goes with it.

Then some will ask, "What is the value of a test if all those who take it fail, as the disciples did on that day?" What the Lord had in mind was to teach His disciples several lessons in believing, in loving, in giving, in God's blessing, and finally a lesson in orderliness, and possibly one in conservation. Failure sometimes is the best motivation for learning. In this case, after failing to carry out their teacher's order, the disciples became extremely interested in watching Him do what they failed to do. When they watched, they probably learned a few facts about their teacher they did not know before.

A Lesson in Believing

God had used this technique many times before for the purpose of strengthening the faith of the person tested. The Bible is full of such stories. In almost every case, someone's faith was strengthened as a result of it. One story that beautifully illustrates this is the story of Abraham. When God first called him he was seventy years old, he was rich but had no children. His wife Sarah was barren. God asked him to leave his home, his friends, and follow Him. He promised him

that his reward would be that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, the sand on a beach, and that in his seed, all the tribes of the world would be blessed (Gen 12:1,2,3). Abraham left, but took with him his father, Lot his nephew, and his family. He did not strictly obey God, because God's orders to him were very clear, "Go from your country and your kindred." Lot and his family were definitely his kindred. It is obvious that at this point, Abraham's faith in God was, at best, shaky. But God stayed with him.

When he moved to Canaan, the area was hit with a severe famine. This was a test that Abraham failed when he decided to go to Egypt. He should have realized that the God who made these impossible promises could also feed him in the midst of the famine. But he took matters in his own hands and fled to Egypt where there was no famine, and where he could provide for himself. After he settled in Egypt, he again failed to see that God could protect him from the Egyptians, so he asked Sarah to say that she was his sister instead of his wife. He was trying to protect himself against a possible attack as a result of his wife's beauty. What was the consequence? Pharaoh took her to become one of his wives. So Abraham subjected Sarah to adultery, while he enjoyed the gifts that Pharaoh bestowed on him because of his wife.

The story has a happy ending. Despite Abraham's failure, God punished Pharaoh by inflicting him and his house with great plagues. Pharaoh, realizing that he was punished because of Sarah, called Abraham, and reprimanded him for not telling the truth and expelled them both from the land of Egypt. Again God stayed with him, protecting him and continued to repeat his promises again and again.

You would think that Abraham would learn his lesson, and believe that God could further protect him after his rescue in Egypt. But this did not happen. Abraham did not learn much from what happened in Egypt, so when he moved back to Canaan, he repeated the same scenario with Abimelech, King of Gerar. The ending was repeated. God threatened the King with death if he kept Sarah. He told him that Abraham was a prophet, and that he should ask him to pray on his

behalf. Was Abraham's faith strengthened at this point? We don't know, but he did not repeat this mistake again. This indicates that, this time, he may have learned something.

As we examine what he did in relation to God's promise that he would have children despite their age and Sarah's barrenness, we find he was not exactly a model of faith either. It is true that Abraham waited a long time for God to fulfill His promise to him, but that was another test that God chose to put him through, and again he failed. Abraham waited and waited. Fifteen years passed since he had left Ur and followed God, and still he was childless. His faith must have suffered to the extent that he complained to God when He appeared to him to reassure him of His promises. He told Him that he will die and that the heir of his house will be Eliezer of Damascus. Then God took him outside and showed him the stars of the sky and told him that his children will be like the stars in number. The Bible tells us that when he heard this, he believed God. But as we examine what he did afterwards, we find that his faith must have waned again as the years went by and God did not fulfill his promise. This time, at the advice of his wife, he took matters in his own hands, and decided to help God fulfill His promise by taking his Egyptian servant Hagar as a second wife.

God was not pleased by what Abraham did, but stayed with him. He knew that he would eventually have an unshakable faith in Him, but would need further help to reach that stage. After Ishmael was born, Abraham thought that he had the son through whom God would fulfill His promises to him, and he may have felt satisfied and happy. After thirteen years of silence, when Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him, to renew His promises to him, and to tell him that Ishmael was not the son of the promise. Sarah his wife will give birth to a son whose name will be Isaac, and he, not Ishmael will be the son through whom God will fulfill His promise.

Abraham's response wasn't exactly the reflection of strong faith. He expressed his disbelief. The Bible tells us that, "Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man

who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen 17:8). Again Abraham failed the test, and doubted the word of God. But despite this, God fulfilled His promise to him. Shortly after, his wife gave birth to Isaac. When this happened, Abraham must have felt ashamed of his continuous disbelief in God's word for so many years. He must have recalled the first time God called him when he lived in Ur, and the many times his disbelief had led him to do something that displeased God.

He must have recalled how, despite these failures, God stuck with him, and finally fulfilled all his promises. His faith at this point must have soared to new heights. He may have realized that all his efforts away from God had only brought him failure and despair, and that it was God who had come through, when things got bad, and that without Him, he wouldn't have been able to make it. This is the greatest lesson in faith that we all need to learn. Abraham learned it at the age of hundred. You may think that after reaching this level of faith, God would not subject Abraham to any more tests, but He did. This test was not to teach him anything new, as it was God's way of giving Abraham his due.

This test was God's way to demonstrate to all, including the coming generations the strong nature of His servant's faith. His success in that test with flying colors was the thing that earned him the title of "The Father of Faith". It is interesting to note that this last test was the most difficult, as befits its purpose. The Bible tells us that after Isaac became a handsome young man close to twenty (as many Bible students suggest), God called on Abraham, and told him, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love. And go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Gen 22:2).

As we examine what God said to Abraham, and particularly the way He worded His order, we cannot come up with any obvious reasons, why He had to remind Abraham, that Isaac was his only son, the son that he loved. Was He making the test that much more difficult? Was He trying to remind Abraham that He knew Isaac was his only son

(since Ishmael was sent away with his mother sometime before) and that He knew how much he loved him? By this, God was telling Abraham, “Do not try to persuade me to rescind my order, by reminding me that Isaac was your only son, the son that you love so much. I know that.” It is as if God was telling him, "Abraham, I don't want any discussions or appeals. I want you to obey". Abraham did not utter one word, and he must have spent the night in deep thought. He may have asked himself if it was God who spoke to him or someone else.

But as he recalled God's voice, which he had heard many times before, he discarded that possibility. He may have thought, “Why is God asking me to do this? Isn't this the son of promise that He gave me to fulfill the promises that He has repeated over the years? Is He reneging on His promises, or is it because of my past lapses that He has decided that I am not worthy to receive them?” He must have spent the best part of the night with these thoughts, which he refused to share with anyone, even his wife, until sleep overcame him. When he woke up early in the morning, he was sure that it was the voice of God that he had heard. With this question settled, he was not qualified to question God's decision. If God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac, He has the power to either resurrect him from the dead, or give him and Sarah another Isaac.

So with peace in his heart, and a stern determination to obey God, he took wood, a knife, and his son, and set out on the journey that would see his strong faith propel him to new heights in his relationship with God and his obedience to Him. So God tests people sometimes to show how much faith they have in Him, and sometimes to teach them how to trust Him, which was the case when He asked His disciples to give the people to eat.

When the disciples failed, the Lord asked them to supervise the seating of the people in groups of fifty. He then blessed the five loaves and the two fish, broke them, gave them to the disciples and told them to serve the people. The Bible does not tell us how the disciples reacted to what happened. But it is easy to guess that when

they observed the five loaves and two fish, a boy's lunch, multiplying in their hands to become enough for a crowd of at least ten thousand, they were amazed.

Many of them may have felt sorry for their lack of faith in the Lord. Judas Iscariot may have thought that if Jesus did this again, they could charge the people a modest price and make some money. This would give him a chance to steal more from the treasury, which he was keeping. He may have thought that Jesus' powers could be brought to play when it came time to topple the Romans. He may have even thought of specific feats that he could ask the Lord to do in that situation, such as providing food for the attackers, maybe even providing weapons, which would lift a heavy burden from the shoulders of those who will plan the rebellion.

When we reflect on what happened, we can easily see how the disciples went through their first lesson, a lesson in believing. As we said before, when the Lord asked the disciples to feed the people He did it to test them. But they also had to be fully aware of the problem. The Lord's order did that perfectly. This was one of God's favorite techniques. After Adam and Eve disobeyed Him, we see Him call on them, asking Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). Certainly God knew where Adam was. He knew not only that, but that he and Eve had eaten of the forbidden fruit. But He called him to make him fully aware of his sin, and give him a chance to repent. Unfortunately Adam did nothing of the sort. Instead he laid the blame on God, saying that He had given him Eve, and she had given him the fruit and urged him to eat. Some skeptics ask, "Why would God resort to this technique when He knew in advance that Adam would not repent?" The probable reason was to give Adam every possible opportunity to correct his mistake.

This is something that should deepen our appreciation of God's justice, and show how fair it is even from a human point of view. He used the same technique with Cain. After Cain had killed his brother Abel, the Lord called on him, asking, "Where is your brother Abel?" (Gen 4:9). Again God did this to help Cain to focus his attention on

what he had done and give him a chance to repent. But Cain also failed to take advantage of the opportunity given to him by God, and responded with that famous response, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:10).

In today's miracle, after the disciples were made aware of the situation by our Lord's order and were serving the people, they may have felt that they should have believed in Him. These twelve were the closest people to the Lord. They had been with Him from the beginning of His ministry, they had listened to every word He had said and observed every miracle he had done. They stayed with him continually; they had seen Him heal the crippled, the maimed, and the blind. They were witnesses when he cast out evil spirits, and when He calmed the wind and the waves. They were there when He raised the dead, and cured lepers. Seeing Him feed thousands using a tiny amount of food, and being a part of what took place by giving the food themselves to the people, was indeed a strong lesson in faith. You ask, did they learn the lesson, and did they believe in Him after that? The Bible does not tell us, but when we read about a similar miracle that the Lord performed after today's miracle, we will be in a better position to answer that question.

St. Mark and St. Matthew are the only two who mention this next miracle in their gospels. St. Mark writes that after a great multitude followed the Lord bringing Him their sick to heal, they remained with him in the wilderness three days, during which they ate nothing. The Lord was the one who alerted the disciples about the situation, telling them, "I have compassion on the multitude, because they now have been with me three days, and have had nothing to eat. If I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way" (Mk 8:2,3). We notice that this time the disciples did not bring the Lord's attention to the problem; it is He who mentions it. This shows progress on the part of the disciples.

This time, they did not think that the Lord was unaware of the problem. But as we read further, we find that they had not learned much from the previous miracle. They responded by saying, "From

whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in this wilderness?" (Mk 8:4). This is almost exactly what they said the first time. So it seems that they had not learned the lesson of faith that the Lord wanted them to learn, and this despite asking them to gather the leftovers after He fed the multitude. St. Matthew tells us that they gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. This was not a coincidence. The Lord planned it so each of them would carry a basket back to Capernaum.

How could they soon forget these strong reminders and express the same lack of faith as they had shown the first time? We may feel that this is unbelievable behavior. Dear reader, don't be so critical of the disciples. You and I do the same thing. How often do we observe or hear about happenings, events, and even miracles that should make us stronger believers in God, but don't. Mankind has developed a strange ability to dismiss many of the events that God permits to happen to our benefit, or explain them some other way that does not take God into consideration. Was the Lord disappointed in His disciples? He was most definitely not. He knew human nature more than anyone else. He also knew that they needed more time, more experience, and most crucially, they needed the Holy Spirit to give them the strength that they lacked.

A Lesson in Loving

The second lesson is a lesson in loving. The Bible tells us that the Lord had compassion on the multitude. This is a common feature in all His miracles. He had compassion on the widow of Nain and raised her son from the dead, without anyone asking Him. He had compassion on the man who was born blind and opened his eyes again, without being asked. The same thing happened in the case of the man who was paralyzed for thirty-eight years. He did all that He did because He loves mankind. He wanted His disciples to see that and learn that to be a Christian is to love, and that to love is to give.

A Lesson in Giving

This is the third lesson, that of giving. He asked them in the

beginning to GIVE the people something to eat. Knowing the importance of giving in the lives of His followers, Our Lord was an exemplary giver. He gave to people more than anyone in history. He spent the better part of His ministry, in a rare display of love, giving people what they needed. He also talked about giving few times, to teach His disciples the true meaning of the act of giving. So in the Sermon on the Mount, He told the multitude, "When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do... But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Mt 6:2,3).

Another time when He was talking about His second coming, He told them, "Then the king will say to those on the right, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink.'" (Mt 25:34). He wanted them to learn two important facts about giving.

The first is that it should be done in secret, and not to be flaunted. This emphasizes the principle that if the motive behind the behavior is not good, the behavior itself, no matter how good it appears, will not be acceptable to God. So if the motive behind giving is to be seen by the people in order to be praised by them, it will not benefit the giver. This is the only inappropriate motive that the Lord specifically mentioned. But there are other inappropriate motives for giving that are also condemned by Him. Some people give to feel superior. These people, when they give, they feel good about themselves. Giving gives them a feeling that they are superior to those who receive their gifts. It is amazing that these people refuse to accept gifts from others, and if somebody gives them something, they find a great deal of difficulty in dealing with that.

The author had such an experience. Several years after he came to this country, a friend came to the U.S. for a visit. When he came to see the author, he brought him few valuable gifts, which he thankfully accepted. The following year the author visited Egypt, and took a nice gift with him for his friend. As he presented the gift to him, he was

shocked when his friend exploded in anger, telling him, "Why are you giving me this gift?" The author, embarrassed in the face of such unfounded anger, and arrogance, was dumbfounded, and for a minute couldn't find the words to answer that strange question. Finally, he found himself saying, "because, I love you". This simple fact demolished the friend's rage, and the reprimand turned into praise.

The second lesson our Lord wanted His disciples to learn about giving is that it is the true essence of love. Because God loves us so much, He will give us everything we need. Many times He explained this simple yet unbelievable spiritual fact to them in an attempt to make it a part of people's reality, but they did not believe Him. Once He spoke of the birds of the sky, and how they do not sow or reap yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Another time, He talked about the lilies of the field, and how they do not toil nor spin, yet, not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of them (Mt 6). And then He asked His listeners, "If God takes care of these, will He not take care of you?" Another time, He told them that if God keeps track of the sparrows, to the extent that none of them perishes without God's permission isn't it logical that He will take care of you? He reminded those listening to Him, that they are more precious to Him than many sparrows.

A Lesson in Blessing

The fourth lesson was that of blessing. Our Lord wanted to teach His disciples and the people that God's blessing is something that really exists. It is not only something that the Priests and the Pharisees talk about frequently, but it is also a reality in the lives of those who follow Him. He wanted them to see it with their own eyes as they observed the five loafs and the two fish feed thousands of people. He wanted them to touch it as they gave the multitude the result of God's blessing. He wanted them to feel it when they gathered the leftovers and each carried a full basket. God's blessing is one of those things that we cannot understand or believe unless we have experienced and enjoyed it. It is something that defies human logic, and flies in the face of the principles of science, and mathematics.

When I was asked to explain it to youth groups, I found that the best approach is the simplest. So after years of attempting to explain the concept, by elaborate explanations, which many times did not work, I tried the simple formula that God's blessing means that $1+1=3$. When my listeners objected that $1+1=2$, I told them that arithmetic does not apply to God, because He has His own. Then I explained that $1+1+B$ (which stands for blessing) adds up always to more than 2. Sometimes it will be 3, some other time it may be 4,5,6,7; or any other number that man can think of. And when they asked, "How can this happen?" I told them, "Don't forget that we are talking about God, for whom nothing is impossible."

A lesson in Orderliness

Another lesson that this miracle can teach us is the lesson of orderliness. We notice that before The Lord fed the people, He asked the disciples to seat them in groups of fifty. This was necessary, because if the people were not seated, and Jesus began to give away food, most probably the people would have rushed, pushed, and shoved each other in an attempt to get it. It is not farfetched to imagine many children and women being trampled under the feet of those who were eager to get to the food before others. Another benefit was that this orderly process gave the people a chance to watch what was happening, and know the source of the food they were enjoying, something that they would have been unable to do if there was no order. We also notice that Jesus told the disciples to gather the leftovers after the meal. He did this to teach them that it is desirable to clean a place after using it, as a measure of conservation, and also as a courtesy to those who will be using the same place or those who will just pass by.

The topic of orderliness is seldom talked about in our churches. My guess is that there are a few reasons behind it. First, people fail to associate it with godliness. Second, many people including some of those who preach the word of God, are not orderly and organized in their private lives. So, how can they preach about it? As we think of

this, we find supporting evidence that orderliness and neatness are desirable in the sight of God. Just look at the universe around you. What do you see? Do you see orderliness or chaos? Nobody can deny that the universe is meticulously organized. Everything, every component of this magnificent universe is an example of orderliness. The earth, the moon, the planets, the sun, and the stars, are perfectly round. Each has an exact orbit, which they follow year after year. Our earth rotates on its axis once every twenty-four hours, and revolves around the sun in three hundred sixty five days and a fourth. The moon rotates around its axis in twenty-eight days and revolves around the earth also in twenty-eight days. Everything is beautifully organized, and perfectly synchronized with the rest of the universe. Such an organization boggles the mind, even the most sophisticated mind.

This is the strongest evidence that all this has not created itself, or jumped into existence by mere chance, but was created by a God who has the intelligence and the power to create it to such perfection. Can we say then that orderliness is one of the qualities of God? I think we can. The Bible tells us "God is not a God of confusion" (1 Cor 14:33). I even dare to say, based on this chaos is among the things that God hates. As His followers, who strive to be like Him in everything, we should try to be as orderly as He is. This may be one of the easiest tasks, which is not out of our reach as human beings.

The last observation that many people make about this miracle, is that our Lord fed the people on two occasions, and He spent a good part of His time catering to people's physical needs; healing the sick, casting out evil spirits, and raising the dead. This, they say indicates that God is concerned with our physical existence. Then they ask, "Why then are we condemned when we show concern about it?" This may appear as a dilemma, but it is not. God knows that we are concrete entities with needs in order to survive. He acknowledges this in the prayer He taught to His disciples when He included the phrase "Give us this day our daily bread". So He even allowed us to ask Him in prayer for our physical needs. The only thing that He cautioned us is to not be obsessed with those needs to the extent that they become

the focus of our life, while our spiritual needs are forgotten. God wants us to have our priorities shuffled; putting our spiritual needs first, and our physical ones at the bottom of the list.

Dear reader: You may not have expected that all these valuable lessons could be gleaned from such a simple episode. I hope that you have enjoyed what I shared with you. But this is not what this book is written for. It is written to bring you the word of God in an alive and dynamic form, so it triggers serious consideration of the direction your life is taking, in the hope that you will stir it in the direction of God.

3. CATCHING MANY FISH

This episode happened early in our Lord's ministry. One day after He called a few of His disciples to follow Him, and began to be known, Peter, James, and John went fishing. This was their profession and the way they earned their living. As professional fishermen tell you, even though they are experts, skilled, and know a lot about fishing, there are days when they catch a lot of fish and days when they catch a few. But on that particular day, they caught nothing. They spent the whole night working very hard, casting their nets, and gathering them, in places they knew from past experience were good places to fish, but to no avail. When the sun finally rose and the light began to chase the darkness away, they knew it was time to go home. So, frustrated and exhausted they began the trip back.

We Toiled All Night and Caught Nothing

As they reached land, they noticed the Lord speaking to a group of people. They brought the nets to the shore, and proceeded to clean them. As they were about to be done, and thinking about the long needed rest they were going to enjoy when they got home, they observed the Lord getting in Peter's boat, while continuing to talk to the people. They waited for Him to finish, and probably thought of inviting Him to go with them to one of their homes. Looking at the

Lord to see when He would leave the boat, they were surprised to see Him wave and call them back to Him. Then He told Peter to move the boat a little from the shore. After He had finished talking, He sent the people away. Peter expected that He would disembark, but He did not. Then, to their utter disbelief He said to Peter, "Put out into the deep, and let down your net for a catch" (Lk 5:4). Peter, thinking the Lord was unaware of what happened, politely told Him, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing, but at your word I will let down the nets" (Lk 5:5).

Peter was telling the Lord, that their first attempt was done at night when the fishing is at its best, they had been to the best places, and despite those favorable conditions, they had caught nothing. Now you are asking us to go back and try again under unfavorable conditions. At this point, was Peter convinced that they would catch fish, or was he just being polite to the Lord, doubting that they would catch anything?

At Your Word I Will Let Down the Nets

The Bible does not tell us anything about this. So there are two possible scenarios. One scenario would put Peter in the same class with Abraham, Noah, Moses, Joshua, David, Gideon, and others who obeyed God under the most trying conditions. They all did it at the word of God. At God's word, in the midst of evil people, who ignored his warnings about the punishment to come and accused him of being mad, Noah built an Arc. At God's word, Abraham left the security of his home and the familiar territory in which he grew up. He left all, including his kin and relatives, and followed God into the unknown. At God's word, Moses went back to Egypt, where he was a wanted fugitive, to ask the mighty Pharaoh to release the Israelites to worship their God. At the word of God, a young boy named David went to fight the heavily armed giant Goliath, with nothing in his hand except a slingshot. At the word of God, Gideon reduced his army to three hundred men, and attacked the armies of the Medianites and the Amalekites, which numbered in the thousands, and defeated them.

At the word of God, Joshua lead the Israelites and crossed the Jordan River as God parted its waters as He had done before to the waters of the Red Sea. Also at the word of God, he entered the city of Jericho with no one in his army striking a single stroke with knife or sword. The Lord, true to His word to him, made the great wall around the city fall, without anyone touching it. What these people did, judged by conventional wisdom would definitely be called madness. But to those who did it, it was the height of wisdom. They did it because they had faith in their God.

The other scenario would put Peter in the company of Thomas who doubted that Jesus rose from the dead (Jn 20:25), Sarah who doubted that she would bear a child at her advanced age (Gen 18:12), and Jeremiah who had doubts about his ability to carry God's message (Jer 1:6). If Peter did not have faith in Jesus at this point, he may have felt justified in his feelings.

The reasons that may have contributed are: He may have looked at the twelve selected by the Lord to be His disciples and confidants, and found them not an impressive group. He certainly did not classify himself or the others as equal in knowledge, influence, or stature to the scribes, the Pharisees, or the Priests. Since the Messiah was supposed to restore the Kingdom to Israel, it made little sense for him to select people with no prestige or social standing, nor the potential to help Him to accomplish what he came to accomplish. This may have been one of the reasons for the doubt that lurked in the back of Peter's mind.

But there are other reasons, which contributed to the specific situation. In this case, Peter was a skilled fisherman who was being second-guessed by someone who had not fished a day in his life, and who in Peter's judgment, could know nothing about fishing. So, when the Lord asked him to lower the nets and try again, he did so out of courtesy, and not out of faith. Those who think this, claim that what Peter said after the catch, is another indication that he had his doubts. They say that, after observing the size of the catch with two boats so full that both began to sink, he was so overwhelmed with feelings of

regret because of his doubt, that he ran to the Lord, and apologizing, asked Him to depart from him because he was a sinful man. At this moment, Peter probably felt his sinfulness compared with the Lord's righteousness, as is always the case when men catch a glimpse of God's glory.

This story, which looks on the surface too simple to be recorded in the Bible, may be so. But even simple things in the hands of God, are powerful teaching tools from which we can learn very valuable lessons. So, what can this story possibly teach us?

The first lesson becomes clear as we ask, was the complete failure of the disciples to catch anything on that day something that just happened, or did God plan it? The answer to this or any similar question should be God planned it. Then we ask, why? Why did God do that? Since we know that He never does anything without a good reason, we believe that although the Bible does not help us in situations such as this, nevertheless there was a reason, or possibly reasons, behind what happened that day. As we reflect on the details we can see that God has created a problem for Peter and his friends. They have failed, maybe for the first time in their lives, in fishing, something that they do best. Someone may ask, "Does God enjoy seeing man fail?" In answer we say, "Of course not, if it is failure for failure's sake. But if it is failure for the sake of learning, God is all for it."

In other words, if our failure will teach us a lesson, God will not only allow it, He will plan it. In this episode He wanted to teach Peter and the rest of the disciples to depend on Him in everything, even in things that they do well. Certainly Peter, James, and John were sad when they failed, but when the Lord helped and they experienced unprecedented success, they began to realize that without God's help they would be unable to do anything. This is one of the most important and most difficult lessons for the Lord to teach His disciples. After our corruption by Satan, it is against human nature to feel the complete helplessness that this condition requires. Man's arrogance gets in the way. Another lesson that the Lord wanted His

disciples to learn was that God cares about our physical needs. It is true that He does not want us to be obsessed by them. Nevertheless He is aware of them, and He stands always ready to provide them for us. So if Peter and his friends failed to catch any fish, because He knows that they must make a living, He stepped in and took care of it. After all, didn't He feed the Israelites manna and quail forty years in the wilderness?

The final question that I would like to put to you, dear reader is, where do you stand on the previous lessons? Do you have the faith to believe that without God, you are nothing? Do you have the faith to believe that God knows your physical needs and that He will provide them for you? I hope and pray that you do. Sit down alone in the quietness and solitude of your bedroom and examine the depth of your faith. Ask yourself, "Do I really believe God when He says 'I will take care of you?' Am I listening to God's voice, or am I listening to Satan's voice who is telling me, 'Don't believe God, He is not interested in you, He only wants you to obey, and if you don't, He will punish you without mercy?'"

You and you alone can answer these questions honestly. Your answer will determine the course that you will take. If your answer is that your faith is weak, or non-existing, simply ask the Lord to give you the gift of faith, and He will. When you ask Him this in prayer, be honest in what you say. God likes honesty.

After His transfiguration on Mount Hermon, when The Lord joined the rest of His disciples, a man complained to Him that His disciples were unable to cast an evil spirit from his son and asked if He could. When Jesus said to him, "If you can? All things are possible to him who believes." (Mk 9:23) The man, realizing that he did not have that kind of faith, cried out to Jesus apologizing for his lack of faith, "I believe, help my unbelief." (Mk 9:24) The Lord, appreciating his honesty, ordered the evil spirit to leave him.

4. HEALING THE DEMONIAC

Among the miracles that The Lord did during His short stay on earth, was to cast evil spirits from many people. The Gospels mention some of the changes that these people suffered as a result, showing the strong influence that the evil spirits had on them. The changes seem to be mainly physical, and intellectual. They caused some to lose one or two of their senses, so they become blind, or deaf. Some lost their ability to speak, and became mute. The common factor among all was that they lost their ability to live with other people and suffered a significant loss in their rational powers. They often behaved in a way closer to animals than to humans.

The Bible talks about evil spirits, and unclean spirits. They are the same, and are believed to be the angels who followed Lucifer when he rebelled against God. Lucifer became Satan, and his followers became demons. It is interesting to note that people afflicted with evil spirits were not regarded as sinners, nor were they shunned by society like lepers. They were the ones who left their homes voluntarily to live in cemeteries, or other places away from people.

In this episode, as our Lord was walking with His disciples, surrounded by people, they brought Him a man possessed by an evil spirit, which made him lose his sight, his hearing, and his speech. St. Matthew wrote that when our Lord cast out the evil spirit, the man regained his sight, his hearing, and his speech. The first question that most people ask, is “Why does this happen? Does Satan or his demons need a human shelter?”

One Way to Corrupt Man

It seems that the reason behind possession is their strong desire to corrupt as many human beings, and turn them against God, as possible. This is their ultimate goal and their only mission. Since the Lord God created man, they want to corrupt him, and make him fall as they did. Misery likes company they say. Their way of doing this is to tempt him with the forbidden "pleasures" that God prohibited. They also discovered that when they dwell in a human being, they are

able to completely control him, and distort his rational powers and abilities, which he needs to follow God.

When this happens, that person becomes one of their guaranteed followers. It seems also that they enjoy being in a body, whether alive or dead. One day, the Lord was presented with a man possessed with evil spirits, who could not be made well by His disciples. When the Lord asked them about their name, they told Him that they were a legion, or many. And when He ordered them out of the demoniac, they begged Him to allow them to go into a herd of swine that was near by, and He did. It is true that the swine dashed toward the river and died, nevertheless, the demons seemed agreeable to that, since they were the ones who asked for it and the ones who drove them to the river.

Does it Happen Today?

The second question that people ask is, “Does this still happen today?” The answer is, yes it does. Not much has changed in the motives that made evil spirits try to invade man's body. Since the time of Jesus, Satan's attempts to control man are the same, God's call to repent of his sins is the same, and man's inclination toward evil is the same. Some may point out that much has changed since Jesus' time. Satan has been conquered on the cross, and has been bound; man's hopeless condition has been changed to a hopeful one. Jesus died for him, and gave him salvation, reconciling him to the Father. Man was also given the power of the Holy Spirit to help him conquer sin. All this is true, but all these changes have not affected Satan's desire to do everything in his power to keep man from following God. Those changes have drastically improved man's chances to slip away from Satan's grip. This may have even strengthened his resolve to double his efforts to accomplish his goal.

Who is a Possible Candidate?

The third question that people ask is, “Who among humans is a possible candidate for possession with evil spirits?” This is a tough one. Those who ask this question are really asking, can a Christian

who was baptized and received the Holy Spirit, be invaded by an evil spirit? Here the Bible does not offer much help. But we also notice that the Bible does not mention any episode in which a Christian was reported to have been possessed with evil spirits. If such possession happened to any Christian, there was an ample chance to mention it in the Acts of the Apostles, or the many Epistles, which covered an extensive area of the known world at that time, and spanned a few decades.

Of course we all know that the absence of any event of this kind from the New Testament books does not offer any proof that it didn't happen, it only indicates that the chances of this happening are greatly diminished. To this we add, that if the disciples encountered or observed it, wouldn't they have dealt with it, especially when they observed the Lord paid a lot of attention to it? And if they did why would they fail to report it, so it can be included in the record? Another observation is, when we ask Priests who perform these miracles whether they have done this for any Christian, they say no. And they follow this by saying, that Christians have the Holy Spirit inside them, so how can a demon invade their bodies? Then they remind us that there is no way that light and darkness can occupy the same space.

Can this be the Son of David?

As we reflect on what took place that day, we find that there were several reactions to what happened. The first came from the people who were present and observed what Jesus had done. St. Matthew wrote, "And all the people were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?'" (Mt 12:23). So ordinary people were impressed by what they saw, and wondered whether Jesus was the promised Messiah. They did not doubt. They could not hide their joy in expressing hope that this man may be the long awaited Savior.

By the Power of Beelzebul

The second reaction came from the scribes and the Pharisees. They said, “He casts evil spirits by the power of Beelzebul.” But before talking about their response, and in order to fully understand it, we have to know who were the scribes, the Pharisees, and the rest of the religious leadership of the Jewish nation.

The religious leaders of that time were four groups: the Priests including the High Priest, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. The scribes were the copiers of the law, who defended it, preserved it, and taught it. Many of them implemented it by becoming either lawyers or judges. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two groups who engaged in more or less the same kind of activity. They interpreted the law, including the answer to the very important question; “Why did God give the law to Moses?” Each group had an interpretation, which was significantly different from the other.

The Pharisees who came mainly from the lower middle class, and whose understanding of the common man was incorporated in their view of the law, subscribed to a more human interpretation. They said that following the law would result in personal fulfillment to those who obey it. They believed that the law was given so man could attain happiness by obeying it. As a result, they put a lot of emphasis on how people treat each other. They also believed that since the Israelites were the only people who were chosen by God, and the only ones who were given the law, they must be superior to the rest of the world, and must maintain higher standards of behavior than others.

The Sadducees came from the upper echelons of the Jewish society. Many were rich landowners. Contrary to the Pharisees, they did not believe in the immortality of the human soul, or life after death. They believed that Temple worship was the center and the main purpose of the law. This is why many of them were Priests.

It is rather obvious that the Pharisees thought that the horizontal relationship between man and man was the most important dimension of religion, while the Sadducees felt that the vertical relationship between man and God the most important part of religion.

Christianity teaches that both are important, but puts greater emphasis on the relationship between man and God.

This was what the Lord said when the lawyer asked Him how he could inherit eternal life. He asked him, "You know the law, how do you read it? What is the greatest commandment?" The lawyer answered, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength." (Mk 12:30). Then the Lord told him, "Do this and you will live". Our relationship with God is the foundation on which we build our relationship with our fellow man. In other words, we cannot have good relationships with others, unless we have a good relationship with God.

Going back to the response of the three groups to what happened, we have first to be aware that they were enemies, since they held the different views explained above. It is interesting to note, that despite the enmity that existed between them, they all agreed in their reaction to everything that Jesus did. They severely criticized Him, and were very influential in bringing Him to trial. One may wonder about the Pharisees and why were they against the Lord. One can understand the stand that the scribes and the Sadducees took. They were known for their rigidity and inflexibility, following the letter of the law and not its spirit. But why were the Pharisee opposed to Him? They were people oriented, and believed in the value of ethical behavior, something that our Lord displayed in everything He did.

Obviously the scribes and the Sadducees became corrupt as they practiced and enjoyed their authority over the people. As more people submitted to their authority, respected them, and hesitated to question their behavior, the more corrupt they became and the more they abused their authority. They say that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. So these leaders thought that they were superior to the people, and looked down on them. After all, they were the ones who knew the law, interpreted it, and defended it.

They believed that this made them infallible and righteous. They saw the mistakes of others, but were blind to their own mistakes. They

may have been in our Lord's mind when He told His listeners one day, "Why do you seek the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye, while there is a log in your own eye?' You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Mt 7:3-5).

As time went by, those absolute leaders, whom no one dared challenge, became more and more interested in the ritual and the form and forgot the substance. Their religion deteriorated to superficialities and trivialities. No wonder our Lord condemned what they did, trying to teach them that God wants mercy and not sacrifice, that they ought to clean the inside of the pot, instead of the outside, that they should stop tithing the dill and cumin, and begin loving, giving, and forgiving.

The Pharisees, who had a good and humane beginning, were ridiculed and despised by the other two groups, so they too began to travel the same road. As they did, they too became separated from the people and became as snobbish and aloof as the other two groups. By the time the Lord came, the three groups were very similar in their orientation and philosophy. This is why they all were against Him. They saw Him as a threat to their authority. When He began to publicly expose and criticize them and called them to repent in front of the people, they felt humiliated, and began to realize the threat to their livelihood. This is why they united against Him and decided to destroy Him.

So, they responded the same way to the miracle that He performed. They could not deny it, so they had to come up with a logical explanation to what happened. The only one that will make sense to the public was that He had an agreement with Beelzebul, the prince of demons. They had accused Him before, saying that He was not even a Prophet, but an imposter, because He broke the Sabbath, He loved sinners and publicans, and let women sinners touch Him. So if He

was not from God, the only explanation of how He performed all these miracles was that He used the power of Satan, and not His own.

The Hostility of the Pharisees

Their hostility toward the Lord was never more obvious than when they explained His miracles that way. The cleverness of this explanation is that it not only discredits this miracle, but His other miracles as well. But the Lord did not see it as such a clever explanation. He pointed out to them that what they said did not make any sense. He told them that their statement defies common and simple logic.

Before we explain what He meant, it may be interesting to track the name "Beelzebul" to see from where it came. In the Old Testament there was a god with the name Beelzebub, whose name meant 'the lord of flies'. It was the god of Ekron, whom king Ahaziah wished to consult, but was prevented by Elija (2 Kin 1:2-5), and there was another god with the name Beelzebul, whose name meant, 'lord of the high place'. This was a Canaanite god, who was mocked by the Israelites who called it, the prince of demons.

Every Kingdom Divided Will Not Stand

When the Lord heard their accusation, He responded by pointing out to them and to the rest of the people, that the prince of demons is not stupid, if he casts out his followers, this means that his kingdom is divided against itself. And since every kingdom divided will not stand, then the inevitable conclusion is what you say, simply cannot happen. Satan did not and will not voluntarily divide his own kingdom. His kingdom is united and strong. He is the one who is dividing every other kingdom. He is the author of the famous policy, "Divide and conquer", which he has used and is still using to conquer individuals and nations.

Just look around you. What do you see? You can easily see the results of his work that has resulted in all kinds of division among

people. These divisions spell failure and doom for most of the human beings who live on this planet, and have led to the unquestioned supremacy of the master plotter who designed it, and who was correctly called by the Lord, "The prince of this world". As you examine the condition of mankind today, you will see all kinds of division. The world is divided into various camps. So we find the capitalists, the neutrals, and the communists (even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there are still China and Cuba).

We also find that within any one camp there are many divisions. Despite the fact that nations with the same ideology should cooperate, we find severe competition, rivalry, and all kinds of efforts, legal and illegal, in an attempt by each to get ahead of the rest. Spying on each other and plotting against each other happens even between allies and friends. We also find that every nation is divided between rich and poor, into "haves" and "have-nots", learned and ignorant, "white collar" and "blue collar", black and white, workers and management, and Chiefs and Indians.

When we consider religion, we also find the result of Satan's work in this area. You will find atheists, agnostics, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Moslems. And if you look carefully into any of these divisions, you will find that each them is divided into many smaller divisions. Even the church did not escape Satan's work, and we can observe the result. Today, there are about one thousand different denominations that call themselves Christian. Some may claim that having all those groups is not bad. After all, it is often said that 'Variety is the spice of life'. This may be true, if those differences did not trigger any further action and the divisions had been able to co-exist in peace. But this is not the case.

Every one of them believes that they alone know the truth. If this feeling stopped at that, coexistence would still be a possibility. But the problem comes from the determination of each to convert the rest to its point of view. This is the reason behind the atrocities that have been, and are still being, committed in the world today. To put it simply, people divide themselves into we, and they. "We" are always

good, and “they” are always bad. If it stopped there, things wouldn't be so bad. But the problem is that the "good" want the "bad" to join them, whether they want or not. And if they do not, they are not left alone; they are forced against their will. And when they resist, violence is used.

Wars have been waged for that purpose. Millions have died on all sides because someone had a different orientation, or a different philosophy from his neighbors and that neighbor could not tolerate the difference. We still remember what one General in the American Army during the Vietnam War said, justifying his order to destroy a small village, which was about to fall to the communists. He said that he had to destroy the village in order to save it from communism.

Satan leaves no human unit without an attempt to divide it. His efforts to divide the most important human unit, the family, are evident everywhere we look. There are broken marriages, divorce, children living with one parent, parents sexually assaulting their children, husbands abusing their wives, children killing their parents, and yes, parents killing their children, people of all ages committing suicide, and the "war between the sexes". As we look behind closed doors at the families that stick together, and who are supposed to have made it, we are dismayed to find that the majority of these too are miserable. We find the father and the mother at odds in almost everything. They agree on nothing. Every discussion begins with a disagreement; every issue ends in a fight. There is no peace in the house and there is no love. In such an atmosphere the children suffer the lack of love. They feel left out and betrayed. They are taught nothing except selfishness, and arrogance.

Even those who decide to stay single, Satan has not left alone. He has succeeded in dividing them against themselves. We find that a part of them wants to know and obey God, and a part wants to follow the world; a part wants to do good, and a part wants to do evil. St. Paul expressed this beautifully when he wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my

mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (Rom 7:23).

The conclusion that Jesus wanted to convey to those who accused Him of complicity with Satan, as the reason for His supernatural powers, is that Satan cannot do this because he knows very well that any kingdom divided among itself cannot stand.

He Who is Not With Me is Against Me

After Jesus responded to the scribes and the Pharisees, He addressed the people, commenting on what happened, and taught them a valuable lesson about a very important spiritual fact. He said, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (Mt 12:30). He told them they must take a position, whether to agree with the scribes and the Pharisees that He cast out evil spirits by the power of Beelzebul or by His own power, the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no neutrality in religion. There are only two roads. One goes to Heaven and the other goes to Hell. There is nothing else.

He said this because He knew that Satan had convinced many that there is a third choice. According to this, one can agree with what God said, disagree, or take the position 'I don't care'. Jesus was telling them that the third option is the same as the second. He was telling them that religion is not a spectator sport. You cannot watch, you are a player, and therefore you have to join one of the two teams. Religion is not a play which you can just watch and enjoy, you can't do that because, whether you like it or not, you are involved in what is happening, you are one of the players, and you cannot say, "I don't care".

Each of us has to make a decision whether to follow God, or follow Satan. We don't have to point out the importance of that decision. It is the most important decision that you make in your life. Everything that happens to you in your life depends on it. Everything that

happens to you after death, results from it. So wake up, and make up your mind.

I hope and pray that it will be the way that our Lord recommended. When closing the Sermon on the Mount, He said, "Every one who hears these words of mine and does them, will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was its fall" (Mt 7:24-28).

The Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

Then Jesus told the people, "I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this age or in the age to come" (Mt 12:31). What does He mean by this? Does this mean that the Holy Spirit is greater than the Son? Why is the Lord talking about a sin that is unforgivable? How can He say this and at the same time, tell us that God is a loving and forgiving father?

In order to understand what our Lord means, we first have to know the meaning of the word "blasphemy". Webster defines it as,

"The act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God, the act of claiming the attributes of deity, or irreverence toward something considered sacred."

In this particular instance, the scribes and the Pharisees showed contempt toward our Lord, by saying that He did not have the power to cast evil spirits, and that He was using Beelzabul's power to do it. Why did He tell them that they were showing contempt toward the

Holy Spirit? And why did He say that any blasphemy against the Son would be forgiven, while the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven?

It seems that He was saying that anyone who says something bad about the son, who had not yet been recognized as the Second Person of the Trinity, but widely perceived, as a man, which He was, would be forgiven. The reason is, the Son did not come to judge the world, but rather to save it. This is why, during His brief stay on earth, He never punished anyone. He forgave those who doubted Him, who abandoned Him, who denied Him, even those who crucified Him. He forgave them all without repentance on their part. The Father also was dealt without reverence by the Israelites after they left the land of Egypt. They denied that it was He who saved and delivered them, and while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments, they made a golden ox and worshipped it, claiming that it was the god who had delivered them from the land of Egypt.

The Israelites blasphemed against God more than any other nation in the history of humanity. What makes their blasphemy so bad was that God was so good to them; choosing them over all other nations, loving them, giving them land belonging to others, fighting for them, and showering them with all kinds of gifts. This preferential treatment elicited nothing except utter contempt and defiance.

Despite this, the Father expressed, time and time again, that He was willing to forgive them if they repented of their sins and came back to Him. In Isaiah he tells them, "Come now let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isa 1:18). So God the Father was blasphemed against time and time again, but He forgave man when he repented of his sins and came back to Him. This was what happened in the Old Testament. Our Lord is talking about the New Testament. What is the difference, you may ask? The difference is that the Second and the Third persons of the Trinity were not explicitly identified or mentioned in the Old Testament.

Our Lord revealed to the Jewish people that He is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, who took flesh and became man to save them from their sins. He also told them that the Holy Spirit, the Third person of the Trinity exists, and that He is the one who will help them perform all that He commanded them to do. He will be the one who will remind them of His new commandments, help them repent of their sins, and offer them the forgiveness that they seek.

It then follows that anyone who acknowledges the Holy Spirit and enlists His help will be saved, but those who deny His existence or His power, like the scribes and the Pharisees in this episode, will not be saved. This is why our Lord said that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not forgivable because in order to repent and obtain forgiveness one has to acknowledge the Holy Spirit and recognize His power. Those who do not, cannot do that, and as a result will die in their sins.

5. HEALING THE PARALYTIC

This miracle is reported by three of the four evangelists; St. Mark, St. Matthew, and St. Luke. St. Luke is the one who gives us the most background information about it. He mentions that the miracle took place in Jesus' home in Capernaum. We know that the Lord and His mother lived in Nazareth until He began His ministry, but after the people of Nazareth rejected Him, He moved to Capernaum, and stayed there for the rest of his life on earth. Capernaum was also the city, which gave the New Testament two of its known personalities; a tax collector called Matthew, and a Roman centurion. This foreigner showed an unparalleled faith in Jesus, and was praised by Him, when He said, "Truly, I say to you, that I have not found so great a faith in Israel." (Lk 7:9) Capernaum was the city in which our Lord performed more miracles than in any other place on earth, nevertheless, it was among the few places that He condemned and prophesied its demise, when He said, "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have

remained until this day. But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom, than for you.” (Mt 11:23)

A House Full of People

St. Luke tells us that on that particular day, there were Pharisees, and teachers of the Law, who came from every village of Galilee, and Judea, and also from Jerusalem. It is hard to believe that all of these came without a previous agreement. This group of Pharisees, and teachers of the law, who were Scribes but elected to teach the Law, instead of just copying it, represented the upper echelon of the religious leadership of the nation. And when you take in consideration that they came from every village in Galilee, and Judea, and also from Jerusalem, you can't help but conclude that the Lord had quite an influential audience on that day.

This group who saw themselves as the responsible leaders of the nation, had heard about the new rabbi, and how He was preaching a new theology. He was attracting big crowds with His miracles, did not live strictly according to the Law, and showed especially his disdain for the holy Sabbath. He also did not come through their traditional training channel, and was viewed by many of them as an outsider who was usurping their power and their influence over the people. These two groups who hated and often fought with each other, found themselves united against a common enemy. So they agreed to meet on that day in His home, to look Him over, and consult with each other what they should do in the face of a deteriorating situation. They may have also thought that their presence may cast some fear in His heart, and force Him to abandon His mistakes and follow their example.

We are not told how many they were. But they were many and that may have been the reason that the house was so full that when the paralytic's friends came, they could not get in, and had to use their ingenuity to get their friend close to where Jesus was.

Against this background, today's miracle happened. The story began when it was heard that Jesus was back in His home, after being out of town, on one of his trips to preach the word of God. As soon as the news spread, the local people did not waste any time to go to Him, most of them brought with them their sick relatives or friends, to be healed by Him. As many of the local people came and also the Scribes, and the Pharisees, there was no place for anybody else. So late comers had to stand outside of all the exits, including the windows and the door.

A Paralytic with A few Friends

There was a paralytic in town, who had a few friends who loved him, and had told him about Jesus. They told him, that He could heal him and that they were willing to carry him to His house when He comes home from his present trip. We don't know whether he believed them or not, because the Bible tells us nothing about his faith, but it tells us that his friends had a lot of faith. So whether he had a weak faith, or had no faith at all, he agreed to go, thinking to himself, "What do I have to lose?" So the friends began discussing the details of their project. There wasn't much to discuss. They had to carry their friend on his bed, walk to Jesus' house, and carry him in to where Jesus was.

They probably did not think too much about people's reaction to what they intended to do. They didn't care, even if they laughed at them. All that they cared about was to take their friend to Jesus. They may have asked one of the people who lived next to the Lord to get word to them as soon as He returns, because they knew that it would take them some time to get ready, and to make the trip. So as soon as they knew that the Lord was in town, they put in motion what they had planned, but by the time they made it to the house, they found it jam packed, to the extent that not even one of them was able to get in. Looking at each other, with no solution in sight, they put down the bed, with their sick friend lying on it motionless.

Suddenly, one of them saw the stairs going up to the roof, and motioned to the others to go up. As they reached the roof of the one-

story house, they found that in the middle, above where the Lord sat, there was loose material that they could remove without too much trouble. Seeing that there was no other way to get their friend to Jesus, they decided to do it. So they proceeded to remove the material. And after that, they tied their friend's bed with four ropes, one on each corner, and gradually and carefully lowered it down in front of Jesus. We don't know how much noise they made, but the Bible tells us that the Lord continued to do what He was doing and was not interrupted until He saw the bed descending from the roof in front of His eyes.

My Son, Your Sins are Forgiven

When the Lord saw that, He stopped, and looked up. When He did, He saw four eager faces looking at Him from the open roof, with apology and eagerness in their eyes. He may have smiled at them, admiring their perseverance, their ingenuity, and most of all their love for their friend and their faith in Him. Then turning His attention to the paralytic, and feeling compassion on him, He looked at him, and in a loud voice that everyone in the house heard, He said, "My son, your sins are forgiven." (Lk 5:20) As soon as He said this, the room began to buzz with the reaction to what He said.

When they heard the Lord say this, the sick man's friends may have felt disappointed, saying to themselves, "We did not bring our friend, with all that trouble, to have his sins forgiven, we brought him to be healed from his paralysis." The sick man may have felt the same disappointment. But what the Lord said made him aware of the real reason behind his sickness. He may have recalled his life before he was hit with paralysis and felt that his life-style, which was that of a sinful man, was the reason for what he suffered from, and that the Lord had hit it on the nail when He offered him the forgiveness of his sins. He probably had similar thoughts before as he lay on his bed, day after day and night after night, wondering why God made him sick with this crippling disease. He may have even felt sorry for his sins. So when Jesus told him this, he was elated, feeling that a heavy load has been lifted off his shoulders.

The Scribes and the Pharisees had a different reaction. So far they had remained silent. They watched as Jesus healed a few people, and may have wondered whether those healings were real or staged. They heard Him talking about a few non-controversial things that they could not disagree with. They may have felt that they had come for nothing. But suddenly, they see a bed with a sick man on it dangling in front of Jesus. It was an amusing sight, the likes of which they have never seen before. They looked at Jesus and saw approval and encouragement in His eyes. Then they waited to see what He was going to say. As a matter of fact, all the assembly was looking at Him, waiting for His reaction. Jesus did not let them wait long. With no hesitation in His voice, He offered the sick man forgiveness from his sins.

A Blasphemy!

The Scribes and the Pharisees gasped, looked at each other in disbelief and anger, and decided that, what they just heard is unadulterated blasphemy, for no one could forgive sins but God. They, stopped short of standing and condemning Him in front of the entire crowd, but they refrained because the people were happy with what was going on, and had expressed their approval in different ways.

I Say to You Rise

Our Lord did not want this opportunity to pass without teaching those present, especially the arrogant Scribes and Pharisees, a valuable lesson in His identity. So He turned to them, and addressed them saying, "Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven', or to say, 'Rise, and walk?'" (Lk 5:22,23) Jesus was telling them that you think that it is easy to say to this sick man that his sins are forgiven, because nobody would be able to check and verify whether it really happened or not. You may be thinking that anyone, even a con artist could say that, and get away with it. You think that healing him, and making him walk again, is much more difficult.

He was trying to let them see that healing the man's physical condition is much easier than healing his soul, by granting him the forgiveness of his sins. He was telling them that many prophets had performed healing miracles before, but none of them was able to grant anyone the forgiveness of his sins. It is true, only God can forgive sin. Then He said, "But that you may know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins." (Lk 5:24) He looked at the paralytic and ordered him, "I say to you, rise, take up your bed and go home." (Lk 5:24) The Bible tells us that immediately, the man, "rose before them, and took up that on which he lay, and went home glorifying God." (Lk 5:25) He did not only rise, and was able to walk after many years being bedridden, during which his muscles had atrophied, but he was able to muster enough strength to carry his bed. No wonder he went home glorifying God.

What the Lord did on that day was a testimony that He is God in a human form. This was what He wanted to reveal to the people and also to the Scribes and the Pharisees. Some people may have at least recognized that Jesus was not an ordinary prophet, for they were amazed, and glorifying God, they said that they had seen strange things. But the Scribes and the Pharisees were not convinced and what they saw on that day did nothing, except to strengthen their resolve to destroy Jesus.

Sin and Disease

Another question, which is often raised every time this miracle is discussed, is the relationship between sin and disease. This is always triggered when people hear what our Lord told the paralytic "My son your sins are forgiven". The same question is raised when people read the story of the man who was born blind, and hear the question that the disciples asked Jesus "Did this man sin or his parents, that he was born blind". People ask, what is the reason behind the existence of disease in the world? Is God punishing man for his sins? And sometimes they expand the question to include other kinds of

suffering such as the pain caused by famine, drugs, divorce, crime, gambling, alcoholism, etc.

This is one of the most difficult topics that have hindered the spread of Christianity in the world. Christianity preaches a loving, and a compassionate God who wants His followers not only to live, but also to live abundantly. He once said, "I came so they may have life, and live it more abundantly." (Jn 10:10) Non-believers claim that if He really loves man, why would He allow all this evil to happen to him? If He truly loves him, He would never have allowed all this misery to devastate his life.

This argument is based upon two inaccurate premises. The first is the assumption that God controls everything in the universe, while He has chosen not to control man's will, nor interfere with his right and privilege to make his own decisions. When man abuses that right, the consequences are often disastrous. The reason that God gave freedom to His beloved man is that He created him in His own image, and part of this is the freedom to choose, so when we love Him, we will love Him, not because we have to, but because we want to.

The second is the notion that disease or any other kind of suffering always hurts man and in many cases ends with irreparable damage to his body, or soul, or both. Sometimes, disease and suffering can be beneficial to man. St. Paul had a thorn in the flesh, about which he asked the Lord three times. But He refused to heal him. St. Paul, whose body napkins were used to heal diseases in others, was denied the healing of his disease, because God was helping him to stay meek. So suffering can be a blessing, and not always a curse.

As we reflect on the problem of disease, we find ourselves going back to the time before Adam and Eve were removed from the Garden of Eden. Trying to imagine what kind of life they had then, one can suggest a few features of that life based on what is written in Genesis and our knowledge about God. Beside the fact that they were happy, enjoying God's company, what He had prepared for them, and especially the love that He had for them, we can also say that there

was no disease, or any other problem, to upset them or make them suffer. Isaiah wrote about the coming of the Messiah. He then wrote a description of a world dominated by Him, in which, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child will lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The suckling child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord." (Is 11:6,7,8,9)

This may be also the way things were in the Garden of Eden before sin entered the world. This is a picture of complete harmony, and of a perfect environment in which to put God's beloved man. There was no hostility between any of God's creatures. Their nature was peaceful and their demeanor was love. There was no disease, famine, or any other problem to upset Adam and Eve. And Adam had dominion over all God's other creatures. He and Eve were the uncrowned king and Queen of the Garden of Eden. How long did this last? We don't know.

But when it ended, as they disobeyed God, many drastic changes happened, not only in their lives, but also in the lives of the rest of God's creation. The perfect harmony that existed between the animals and Adam was lost, and he was no more able to control them. Not only that, but the harmony between the rest of creation was also lost. The result was that the peace that existed between them was shattered, and they began attacking each other in a fierce battle for survival. So the strong began to attack the weak, the big began to pick on the small. The weak and the small, including bacteria, viruses, algae and fungi began to develop their own weapons of defense and of offense against the rest. The result is a world of predators and victims, of sickness and disease, of hatred and revenge, a world of selfishness and greed. A world that has lost all resemblance to that which existed before, and which Isaiah gave us a glimpse of in the passage quoted above.

As the Lord God looked and saw what happened, He was not pleased. He saw his creation being corrupted by His enemy. He saw that in place of the harmony that existed between all of His creatures, there was chaos, and in the place of the love that existed between them, there was hatred. He saw that one of the results of what happened was the emergence of disease and the miseries associated with it, miseries that man will suffer once he is inflicted by it. God did not want things to get out of hand, and for the sake of the man whom He still loved, decided to put laws to rule the world. So He put order in the world, and ordered the living and the non-living things to obey those laws. These are the laws that the world calls the laws of nature, but they are in fact, God's laws for a sinful world, laws that were initiated by God, for man's benefit.

Just imagine that you are living in a world with no laws, a haphazard, a capricious and unpredictable world, where no one can predict what is going to happen next. Let me give you an example. What would be your feeling, if you lived in a world in which there was no law called the law of universal gravitation, which tells us that all objects attract each other by a force determined by their mass. On earth, all objects are subject to the gravitational pull of the earth. This causes them to stay put, as long as they are on a level surface, and no other greater force than the gravitational pull of the earth is acting on them.

We know this and consequently can predict what the components of our environment will do under a variety of conditions. As a result, when we enter any place, we are sure that the furniture will stay in place as long as no other force than that of the earth's gravity influences it. Imagine if this were not the case, and that we had no idea what would happen. As we enter even our homes, the furniture may not stay in its place, but might fly any minute and hit us. This would create in us a severe sense of insecurity that would make our life miserable.

From the above, we can see that disease was among the first consequences of sin, and also of many of the problems that man will meet during his life on earth. Does this mean that everyone who

becomes sick became so because he has sinned? Not necessarily. Let me explain.

There are many reasons why people become sick. The first that we mentioned so far is sin. We know that people who engage in illicit sex are subject to an array of venereal diseases, such as syphilis, gonorrhea, genital herpes, aids, and a few others, which they may contract when they commit adultery. If you get angry often and are consumed with hate for somebody, or you are accustomed to fits of rage or jealousy, most likely you will develop high blood pressure, and maybe heart disease. If you do drugs, you will most likely suffer different physical ailments, such as deteriorating cognition, blurred vision, and impaired judgment. In these cases, the disease is a direct result of sin. Some think that in these cases, God is using disease to punish those who disobey Him, and they don't see this as behavior worthy of a loving God. Satan capitalizes on this by telling man that God is a selfish God who is not interested in anyone but himself, and that He is obsessed with forcing his creation to blindly obey him.

After all, didn't He create man with those needs that have to be met? Then when man meets them his way, he is severely punished. God insists that man fulfill those needs the way He wants him to fulfill them. It is true that punishment was used by God in the past, and continues to be used by Him, but many miss the ultimate goal of punishment, as they think that God uses punishment, to show man His power, or to take revenge on him when he disobeys. This could not be farther from the truth. God punishes offenders, as His means to discipline them, in an attempt to make them repent and come back to Him. Even when He punished Egypt with the ten plagues, the Bible tells us that He did that, so the Egyptians will realize that their Pharaoh is not really God, and that the God of the Israelites is the true God.

But many times man fails to make the connection between his sinful behavior, and his sickness. The result is that he also fails to see the reason for his sickness, and wonders, "Why is this happening to me?" In order for us to understand, we have to know God's attitude toward

our physical needs and problems. It is true that He knows all our physical needs; after all He was the one who created them in us. And it is also true that He is willing to fulfill those needs as we ask Him for them. But if He finds that they interfere with our spiritual well being, He condemns them. There is no better proof of this than when He said, "If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away, for it is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes, and be thrown in the fires of hell."(Mt 18: 9) So disease can be the natural, and direct result of sin, or the tool that God uses to discipline us when we sin, in an attempt to bring us back to Him.

The second reason for disease is carelessness. So when someone ignores one of the laws of God, he pays the price. So if he exposes himself to extreme cold, he will suffer hypothermia. If he exposes himself to extreme heat, he will be burned. If he gets too close to somebody suffering from a contagious disease, such as the common cold, influenza or hepatitis C, the possibility is high that he will catch it. Sometimes we bring it on ourselves when we ignore one of God's laws that He created for our benefit in the first place.

Sometimes disease inflicts people for none of the above reasons. It is not the result of a sin, directly or indirectly. Sometimes no sin is involved, yet God allows sickness or some other calamity to befall someone for no obvious reason. Nothing can dramatize such a condition such as what happened to Job. Here is a man who was, by God's testimony, "perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1), yet he was hit possibly harder than anybody in the history of mankind, for no reason that he could see.

The Bible tells us that God probably did this for two reasons. The first to show His servant's worth. He was boasting to Satan about Job's righteousness, and allowed him to inflict him with every conceivable kind of disaster, to prove to him that he is truly faithful to Him. The second possible reason is God's desire to strengthen his faith, and make him a famous example of faith and patience in the face of unbelievable odds. Included in this category are those who do not turn to God until they are hit with a severe problem. Those people

don't feel the need for God until things start to get out of hand. When this happens they run to God. So if it takes a severe problem, to bring these people to God, so be it.

Still another possible reason for suffering in the world, especially for those who decide to follow the Lord, is to protect them from loving this world. The Lord told us not to love anybody more than Him. He warned His listeners once that, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."(Mt 10:37) St. John wrote in his first epistle, "Do not love the world nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (1 Jn 2:15)

It is hard to imagine that man will be able to follow that commandment in the absence of problems. Even with those problems upsetting him, and making his life miserable, it is a rare person who truly hates this world, and who truly loves God more than this world. The Lord said once, "In the world you will have tribulations." (Jn 16:33) He obviously does not want us to be cozy with the world, because when we do, we tend to forget Him.

6. EYES FOR THE MAN BORN BLIND

One day our Lord was walking surrounded by His disciples and the usual throng of people. Despite the fact that they had come for different reasons, they were there because they were all interested in Him. While a few of them were there in order to catch Him saying or doing something that could be used against Him later, nevertheless the overwhelming majority were there because they wanted something from the miracle worker as He became known. People always lined the streets when they heard that He was passing. Among those was a blind man who was probably there because he used to beg on that street.

Rabbi, Who Sinned, This Man or His Parents?

St. John is the only one among the four writers of the gospels, who writes about this miracle. He tells us that as Jesus reached where the man was, He stopped. As soon as the disciples saw him, they asked the Lord a very significant question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" (Jn 9:2) This meant that the disciples were almost sure that the man's blindness was caused by sin. The only question in their mind was whether he or his parents had committed that sin. This connection between sin and disease was one of the beliefs of many Jews since the beginning. They tell you that, before the Lord God ushered Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, He told Eve that, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth children." (Gen. 3:16) This was the beginning of suffering caused by sin. As man drifted farther away from God, he incurred more suffering through disease and other afflictions that plague his life.

Neither This Man Nor His Parents Sinned

As the Lord paused, the people stopped talking, and looked at Him waiting for His answer. The blind man was probably holding his breath, not knowing what the Lord would say. Would he say that he is innocent or will He say that he is guilty? He did not know much about his parents for he spent most of his time in the streets begging. He may have thought about the past, as far as he could remember, wondering what possible sins had he committed to be punished by being born blind. He may have wondered how on earth could he have sinned BEFORE he was born, to be punished from birth. Then he may have thought that since God knows the future, he may have been punished for a sin that he committed AFTER he was born.

While still engrossed in his thinking, he hears the answer to his dilemma. The Lord was telling His disciples, "It was not that this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God be made manifest in him." (Jn 9:3)

The blind man felt as if a heavy load has been lifted off his shoulders. This unusual rabbi, whose fame had spread over all Judea and Samaria, and was held in high respect by the people, had exonerated him. An added reason for his joy was what the Lord mentioned something about the works of God, and that they were going to be made manifest in him. He probably did not understand what that meant, but was happy to be associated with God in any way.

This was the blind man's response to what he heard. But when people read this today, many wonder, if neither the man's sins nor his parent's, were the reason for his blindness, was it fair for God to blind him since his birth just to show His works in him? To answer that, we have to put ourselves in the blind man's shoes and try to see things from where he stands. First, he was blind from birth, which means that he never enjoyed the gift of sight. And since people don't miss something they never had, then we can conclude that he really did not miss much. Second, he must have gotten used to living and functioning without eyes, to the extent that he did not even ask the Lord to heal him.

The third point is that even if he had been deprived of sight for a few years and that was a sacrifice on his part, just look at what he got from God in return. God himself gave him his eyes. What a privilege! He was so grateful to the Lord that, as legend has it, he followed him and became a strong believer in Him. As we examine the exchange between him and the Pharisees, which we will discuss later, we will see clearly, the spiritual results of what happened, after the Lord touched him. So it becomes obvious that if this man were not born blind, he would have been just another beggar trying to live off the charity of others. He would have probably missed meeting Jesus. Getting healed by him, and having the chance to be changed from an ordinary beggar to somebody whose faith became so strong that he, an ignorant illiterate beggar, saw himself capable of teaching the learned and sophisticated religious leaders of the nation a lesson in faith.

As he was still thinking about all this, he felt something smooth and wet touch his face where his eyes were supposed to be. Jesus has just

made an ointment mixing his spittle with some soil from the ground, and applied this to his face. Again people ask, why did He choose to do that instead of just telling the man to see, which would have resulted in the same result? Again, we do not know, but we can guess. It seems that the Lord wanted us to differentiate between all the other miracles in which he opened the eyes of blind people and this one.

The Bible mentions that Jesus opened the eyes of five people who were blind. These were in addition to the others who were not mentioned as such, but were included in the groups of people who came to be healed and whom he healed. As we examine the five whose stories were detailed in the Gospels, we find that the Lord used different methods in healing them. In the case of the two mentioned by St. Matthew in Chapter 9, he tells us that the Lord touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight. (Mt 9:27) In the case of the Bethesda man, St. Mark writes that the Lord anointed his eyes with His spittle only. (Mk 8:22) In the case of Bartimaeus, St. Luke tells us that the Lord restored his sight by just telling him, "Receive your sight, your faith has made you well." (Lk 18:35)

It seems that one of the main differences between the man born blind and the others, is the fact that the others had eyes, which were at one point in their lives functioning, but for some reason, mostly disease, they stopped functioning. However, the man in this episode was born blind, he never had eyes. In other words, when God was creating him in his mother's womb, He did not create eyes for him. And when He wanted to restore his sight as an adult, He really had to create new eyes for him. This is why He used dust, because Adam was created from the dust of the earth. As to the spittle, it was the element contributed by God in this process of creation, as was the breath of life that He breathed in Adam's nostril in order for him to become a living being. In the other cases the eyes were already there, but were diseased, so the Lord did not need to create new eyes, He had only to heal them of whatever disease they were suffering from.

The Lord in creating eyes for this blind man the way He did, was revealing to the Jewish nation that He is the one who created this

magnificent universe including man. By using clay to create eyes for this blind beggar, He was being consistent with what He had done some time earlier when He created Adam and what He was doing now, because He was the creator then and now. This is what we say in the Apostle's creed, "By whom everything was created".

Then the Bible tells us that the Lord asked him to wash in the pool of Siloam. This may have been our Lord's way to find whether he has faith, that what He did for him will make him see. The man proved that he had such faith, because as soon as he heard the order to go and wash, he obeyed, demonstrating his belief in the Lord. We don't know how he got to the pool while still blind. Maybe someone took him, or it may have been so close that the man needed no help, in getting there.

The important thing is that this man who a few minutes earlier did not even dream that anything would happen to him, suddenly finds himself on the verge of an unbelievable change; a change that instantly made him a new person for the rest of his life. He must have felt an immense joy overtaking him on his way to the pool, in anticipation of receiving his sight. He must have asked himself, "What does the world look like? What do the trees, the birds, the sky, the rivers and the lakes look like? Is the world as beautiful as the people say? Will I love it? What does Jesus look like?"

These and others were among the many questions that crowded his head, on his way to the pool. As he reached his destination, and began to wash, he must have looked in the water with a great deal of anticipation, and when he saw his own face for the first time, his excitement must have reached its peak. He may have jumped with joy, shouting at the top of his voice, "It is true, I can see, I can see". Finally, he found himself praising God, for his wonderful gift.

The next thing that he did was to go back to the same spot in which he used to sit, to show the people that he was no longer blind, and maybe to thank the person who gave him his eyes. But Jesus had

already left. And when the people saw him, they began arguing among themselves, some saying that he is the blind beggar who used to sit in this place, while others said, he is not, but he looks like him.

Hearing this, the man decided to help settle the argument, by telling them, in a voice full of joy and excitement that he is the same person.

This may have been easy to say for the man, because he was anxious to share the news with anybody who is willing to listen. But it left people gasping for answers to other questions, how did it happen? Who is responsible for it? What is its significance? The ordinary people answered these questions by simply asking the man. As he explained to them, how it happened, and that a man called Jesus did it, they were happy and satisfied and probably praised God for visiting His people. Not the Pharisees.

The Bible tells us that the man was "brought" to the Pharisees to be interrogated. This means that in the crowd that witnessed the miracle, there were those who were working for the Pharisees, who had been asked by them to watch the Lord and report to them anything abnormal that happens. Those informers knowing that Jesus had done it on the Sabbath, reported it to the Pharisees who may have sent a few guards to get the man so they could examine him away from the people. The Pharisees asked the man the same questions that the people had asked him before, and he answered them the same way. This time he did not find the acceptance that he found before, but he sensed doubt, and hostility.

So when he told them what happened, they did not believe him, and decided to expose Jesus' true identity. They pointed out the fact that Jesus did this on the Sabbath, and that by this He is breaking an important commandment, and consequently He was not from God. Then they asked him, "What do you think of him?" Without any hesitation he answered, "He is a prophet". Just imagine for a moment, what was happening. The learned and much feared Pharisees were asking a beggar, what he thinks about the man who opened his eyes, after living in total darkness all of his life. They were hoping that he

will be overwhelmed and sensing what their opinion was, that he would succumb to the pressure and give them the answer they wanted to hear.

But to their dismay and shock, that ignorant uneducated beggar stood taller than the arrogant and powerful Pharisees. He stood his ground; he refused to be intimidated by anybody even if it were the religious leaders of the nation. What a strong lesson in telling the truth, that beggar was teaching the sophisticated Pharisees. They were, to say the least, disappointed, and probably became mad at him. This is when they decided to call his parents, hoping to pressure them to say that the whole thing is a hoax. When his parents came and they were asked whether the man is their son, whom they claim was blind since his birth, and how does he see now? The man looked at his parents with great anticipation, expecting them to bail him out, and support his account of what happened.

The parents took their time to answer. They felt the hostility that the Pharisees showed toward their son's testimony for the truth. Being aware of the threat announced that anybody who believes that Jesus is from God, will be excommunicated and kicked out of the Temple, they tried to measure every word they said. They finally marshaled their courage and began responding to the questions put to them by the Pharisees. They began by stating that he indeed was their son. The blind man breathed easier as he heard that, and appreciated his parent's support which he thought was forthcoming. Instead he was dismayed when he heard his father, saying that they do not know how or who opened his eyes, and ended up his answer by stating the obvious that he is of age, you can ask him.

The Pharisees were not pleased either with what they heard. They were hoping that they would say that he is not their son. But they did not only say that, but they confirmed that fact that he was born blind. This put the Pharisees into an uneasy situation. There was no doubt now that the man was blind and that somehow he is no more now. So they went back to him, trying to extract from him something that would discredit Jesus. They asked him again, prefacing their inquiry

by appealing to him "To give glory to God", and telling him that they know that this man is a sinner. This was a veiled threat. They were telling him that what you have said so far is a bunch of lies. By claiming, that Jesus, a man who was seen many times breaking the sacred Sabbath including what he did today is the one who opened your eyes, you are not giving God the glory that He deserves, so you better tell us the truth, or else.

One Thing I Know, I Was Blind and Now I See

The man probably knew what was waiting for him if he insisted on telling the truth, but his gratitude for Jesus was so strong that he decided to do just that, refusing to be intimidated by the Pharisees. After looking at the beautiful temple which he never saw before, and knowing that he will soon be kicked out of it. He looked the Pharisees right in the eye, and without any hesitation he told them, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know, one thing I know; I was blind and now I see". Where did this uneducated beggar get that kind of courage, which many learned and knowledgeable people did not have? Even his parents, who loved him, could not say anything that may upset the powerful Pharisees. This is what happens to people who are touched by God. They change, and they become new people.

The Lord explained this to Nicodemus by telling him, "unless a man is born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (Jn 3:5) "And how are people born again?" people ask, as Nicodemus did. The Lord answered the question with an extended explanation, which can be summarized in one sentence of what He said. He said, "He who believes in Him (The Son) is not condemned, but he who believes not, is condemned." (Jn 3:18) Jesus was telling Nicodemus that the process of being born again begins in the simple act of believing in Him. When this happens, the person begins dealing with God on a personal level. As his experience with God advances, his trust in God's ability to take care of his spiritual and physical needs grows stronger. And when this trust reaches a certain level, the person feels that he can surrender his life to Him.

How Did He Open Your Eyes?

After that daring statement by the beggar, the Pharisees asked him again, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" (Jn 9:26) It is interesting to note that the Pharisees by asking how did He open your eyes are not denying that Jesus opened his eyes; they were only asking him about the way He did it. Their purpose here was probably an attempt to discredit what He did by finding that the way He did it was a violation of some provision of the Law. They have already pointed out that Jesus cannot be from God because He breaks the Sabbath. By further questioning the man, they hoped to add another reason to condemn the Lord. But the man was no help, for he responded by telling them, "I have told you already and you did not listen, why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to be His disciples?"

God Does Not Listen to Sinners

At this point, the Pharisees felt that they had enough from that filthy ignorant nobody, and exploded in rage, "you are his disciple, but we are Moses' disciples". They were telling him, that there is a big difference between Moses and this imposter. They explained what they meant by pointing out that God spoke to Moses, but we don't know with whom this guy is talking, we don't even know where he came from. There is a veiled accusation here that since Jesus was not talking to God; he must be talking to Satan. They reiterated this and made it public when He cast the evil spirit from the man who was dumb and blind, and the Pharisees said that by the power of Baalazabul he casts out evil spirits. The man hearing this did not back off, but answered saying, "This is a marvel," You don't know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does His will, God listens to him. Then he followed by telling them that never since the world began, has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing".

This was the strongest lesson that the arrogant Pharisees had in a long time. The man's logical answer and the strong spiritual facts that it was based on gave them no chance to respond to it a response that would make sense. The uneducated beggar was castigating the mighty Pharisees for their lack of faith in Jesus. He was telling them that anybody who witnesses such a miracle, cannot in good conscience accuse the man who performed it by saying that he is not from God. He was teaching them a lesson in faith. He was telling them why do you concentrate on his origin instead of focusing your attention on his work?

He was telling them, "How can you say that you don't know from where this man came from? Isn't he one of us? Isn't he the son of Mary, and Joseph?" He was drawing their attention to what Jesus did, and what he said here amounts to a splendid defense of our Lord. He began by reminding them that despite your claim that you don't know from where he came, yet he opened my eyes. Then he proceeded by pointing out that God does not listen to sinners who don't believe in him, but to those who do his will. And he followed this by stating the uniqueness of what Jesus did for him, and that no one before him has opened the eyes of somebody born blind. And he concludes from this that if Jesus were not from God, he would have been unable to do what he did.

The Pharisees were shocked and insulted by what the man said, and refusing to dignify his accusations by a response, they did the only thing that would in their opinion save the day for them. They first reminded the man of his origin, by telling him that he was born in utter sin, and that it is mere arrogance for him to say what he said. They were telling him, who do you think you are to teach us? We are the teachers of the nation, how dare you lift your voice against us? Then they followed that by kicking him out of the Temple. The man looking defiantly to them lifted his head high and left probably feeling sorry for the religious leaders of his nation, whom he had learned as a young child to obey and respect.

Most probably he felt no remorse for what he said and did since his eyes were opened. As he was thinking of what happened, mulling it over and over in his mind, the Lord approached him. As he looked at the Lord's face, it was obvious that he did not recognize that he was the one who opened his eyes. Otherwise he would have said something, but he did not.

Do You Believe in the Son of Man?

Then our Lord said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (Jn 9:35) The man asked Him, "Who is he?" Jesus answered by telling him that he is the Son of Man. It is interesting to note that He did not tell him that He was the one who opened his eyes. May be he did not see a need for that because He knew that the man will recognize his voice, or He may have revealed this to him some other way. The fact that the Lord approached him and invited him to believe in Him is an indication that he does this with everyone.

He has been calling you to do the same, and you have not responded. If this is the case, you better learn from the man born blind that wonderful lesson in faith, and say and do as he did, responding by saying, "Lord, I believe." And as he knelt before him and worshiped, you too, kneel and worship Him.

7. THE TRANSFIGURATION

Only two of the evangelists, St. Luke, and St. Matthew mention this unusual miracle. They described it in simple words. St. Matthew wrote that, "Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain. And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light." (Mt 17:1,2) Although St. Matthew describes it in simple terms, there was nothing simple about it. As a matter of fact, it was a very unique miracle. No one has done anything like that before or after the Lord did it. The closest thing to it was when Moses came down from the mountain where he had been with God forty days and forty nights, face to face, to receive the Ten

Commandments for the second time. The Bible tells us that his face was shining to the extent that the Israelites could not look at him, and that they asked him to put a veil on his face when he met with them.

The differences between the two episodes can be summarized in two facts. The first is the degree of what happened. In Moses' case his face was the only part that shone, while in Jesus' case all of Him shone even His clothes. The second difference was that when Jesus shone, He shone with His own light. He let His glory shine through His human body, which was concealing it. But when Moses' face shone, it was merely reflecting God's light after some of it was absorbed as Moses was exposed to the glory of God for a long time.

The other episode that has some resemblance to this one is what happened when John baptized the Lord. While the resemblance between what happened to Moses and what happened during the transfiguration was visual, this resemblance was not. It was aural. In both episodes, the Father testified for His son in an audible voice, using exactly the same words, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him." (Mt 17:5) It is interesting to note that the Father never said this about anyone, else. When He did, He said it these two times.

As we ask why did He say it? We find ourselves guessing again. It seems that the circumstances in which both episodes happened provide us with some clues as to why God chose to do what He did, when He did it. The baptismal declaration took place first to reassure John that indeed He whom he was baptizing is the Son of God. The other possibility is that since this happened before the Lord was to embark on the most important period of His life on earth, a period with a few extremely important tasks, the Father did this to give His son the support that He will need to face those tasks. Jesus was about to fast forty days and forty nights, face Satan in a grueling war of wills, and after that, He was to begin His ministry. So, The Father was helping His son to get through those tasks, especially in answering the devil's persistent statement when he tempted Him, "If you are the Son

of God!" He was telling him, "Yes, indeed, You are My Son, My only Son".

The transfiguration declaration happened at the time Jesus was headed for the cross. When He was incarnated as a man, He was supposed to fulfill two functions given to Him by the Father; one as a prophet, in which He testified to man on behalf of God. The other was that of a priest, in which He plead to God on behalf of the congregation. And instead of the usual behavior of the priest, offering a sacrifice on behalf of the people, Jesus presented himself as the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of all humanity. At the time of the transfiguration, His first task, that of the prophet during which He talked to the people about the Father, His kingdom, how much He loved them, and how loving and forgiving He is, was coming to an end. The second job, that of the priest, was moving to center stage. Again the Father knew that His Son needed strength to go through the next phase of his ministry, so He provided it in the form of a transfiguration in which His glory manifested itself, accompanied with a strong statement of His love and approval.

Some of the other possible reasons were to show the three disciples His perfect humanity, and His perfect divinity, perfectly united. His humanity was obvious to the disciples, but His divinity was concealed, so He chose to reveal it to those three, because they were considered the most important and influential of His disciples and also the closest to Him. He knew that when He was captured, tried, and crucified, His disciple's faith in Him would be at an all time low, and that they would each need all the help they could get, to overcome their doubt, and disappointment in Him. He felt that if these three disciples received an extra measure of reassurance, that they might be able to strengthen the rest when the coming events unfolded.

Also these three had big tasks ahead of them, and the Lord wanted to give them added strength to help them in whatever they would face in the near future. Peter was the most outspoken of all the disciples and would assume a position of leadership in the young church. Didn't the Lord tell him, "Feed my sheep" three times? James became the bishop

of Jerusalem, and was to become the first martyr among the twelve. John was being prepared for the Island of Patmos, and for the visions that led to the writing of the book of Revelations.

To reveal His divinity, it was not only His appearance that changed, but also the presence of Moses and Elijah. We don't know how Peter recognized the two figures who appeared with Him as Moses and Elijah. Probably, Moses carried the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, and Elijah probably had some feature that distinguished his life, such as a chariot of fire, or something else. That is not important. What is important is that the appearance of these two key prophets with Jesus was evidence enough of His deity. It also pointed to what Jesus was doing, and that His mission on earth was a continuation of what happened in the Old Testament.

Moses' appearance was appropriate since he was the one who delivered the Israelites from their physical bondage to Pharaoh, and here he appeared with the Lord who had come to deliver mankind from their spiritual bondage to Satan. He was also the prophet who was given the law by God. Our Lord was accused several times by the scribes and the Pharisees of breaking the law. So Moses' appearance was an indication that Jesus did not break the law.

Moses also was the one who hit the rock (which symbolizes Jesus), and it gave the Israelites water, which sustained their physical life. This happened in the Old Testament, while in the New Testament, our Lord, a much nobler rock, the rock of ages, was hit hard, not to produce water, but to produce His precious blood, which will sustain man's spirituality and bring him eternal life. Moses also prophesied about Jesus to his people, when he said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren, him you shall heed." (Dt 18:15) His appearance with the Lord on the mountain is another indication that Jesus was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

The appearance of Elijah was also appropriate. Not only because with Moses he represented the Old Testament, while the three

disciples represented the New Testament, which made Jesus the link between the two, but also because he represented those who did not taste death and who in a way represent Heaven. Moses represented those who were captured by Satan upon their death and were waiting for Jesus to release them from his grip so we can say that he represented the earth. Elijah was also there to remind man of the sacrifice that he offered on Mount Carmel, when he challenged the four hundred priests of Baal. A much higher sacrifice was about to be offered on behalf of all mankind, when the Lord would be crucified on the cross, as a sin offering on behalf of all humanity.

Also Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets, and their presence emphasizes that these important components of the old covenant between man and God were a heavy burden. Jesus came to offer them the freedom, which the children of God deserve. He once told the Israelites, "If the son set you free, indeed you are free." (Jn 8:36)

The Bible tells us that Peter responded to what he had seen by saying, "Lord, it is well that we are hear; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (Mt 17:4) This was not a practical suggestion as much as it was an expression of what he felt at that moment. He probably enjoyed the scene so much, that he wanted to just stay there and bask in the glory of God. Since the light that emanated from the three figures was too much for his eyes, he thought that it was coming from above. If a booth were built over each of them, the intensity of light would be diminished enough that he would be able to look at the scene without straining his eyes.

This is a typical human reaction to a heavenly scene that was not supposed to trigger a human earthly response, but a spiritual one. Peter was really saying, "Let us just remain here and build tabernacles". Some think along similar lines and feel that the best thing that they can do for God is to build for Him, build cathedrals, monuments, and other buildings that will declare the glory of God. Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that building churches and cathedrals is wrong. But if this becomes the most important thing that

we are doing for Him, it is wrong. Not because buildings never lead to the glory of God, but in many cases they lead to the glory of man and that is what they were built for.

God's work is not building tabernacles or edifices, but rather building a spiritual kingdom, through serving the spiritual needs of the people. Once, as the Lord and His disciples were leaving the Temple, the disciples were so impressed by its beauty, that they could not refrain from making a comment about it to the Lord. St. Matthew tells us that the Lord was not impressed and answered them saying, "Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." (Mt 24:2) So, you and I cannot sit on a mountain and do nothing. We must come down to the reality of the world, toil and suffer, and work hard for the glory of God.

8. RAISING THE WIDOW'S SON

This was the first miracle in which the Lord raised a person after his death. St. Luke writes that as He was about to enter the village of Nain, He saw a funeral, which He stopped. He raised the young man from the dead, and gave him to his mother.

Nain is a small village a few miles south of Nazareth. It still exists in the plain of Jezreel, at the edge of a bigger village called Little Hermon. As we examine the details of this miracle, we find that it has some unique features that distinguish it from the other two miracles in which the Lord raised someone from the dead. St. Luke tells us that when Jesus saw the funeral, He noticed a woman walking behind the coffin hysterically crying. Nothing unusual about that, the Jewish people mourned their dead with intensity paralleled only by that shown by the Egyptians as they buried their dead. This may have been one of the habits they had picked up from them during their long stay in the land of Egypt. What is unusual was what happened after this.

The Lord intercepted the funeral, by touching the coffin. St. Luke wrote that immediately the pole bearers stopped. Why? Nobody knows. It may be that some of them knew Him; maybe they looked at

Him and were awed by His personality and authority. Anyway they stopped. The woman behind the coffin, the mother of the deceased, felt that something unusual was happening. She realized that the funeral procession had stopped. Looking to see what was happening. Through her tears, she saw Jesus, a man she had never seen before, holding up the procession.

Woman do not weep

She was overwhelmed with rage at that stranger who had the nerves to interfere with the last rights of her son. And before she could open her mouth to ask Him, "How dare you do that when you are not one of his friends or even a distant relative?" As she looked at him through her tears, she felt that He was about to say something. She was expecting to hear Him apologizing for delaying the burial of her son. Instead, she heard Him telling her, "Woman do not weep". She must have thought of telling Him, "Who are you to tell me to stop weeping over the death of my only son, my only hope in this cruel world?" But before she could say anything, she heard Him speak to the dead young man. He was ordering him to rise, "Young man, to you I say rise."

The woman, looking at the Lord's face, expected to see the face of a deranged man. But instead of seeing the eyes of a lunatic, she saw the loving and steady eyes of Jesus. There was so much love in those eyes that she began to wonder, "What is he up to?" But before she had time to think about anything, lo and behold, the dead body of her son began to move. Her eyes wide open with disbelief, she saw her son who died a few hours earlier, sitting in his coffin. She thought that she was dreaming, but she was awakened from her dream by the voice of her son praising God.

We can easily see the uniqueness of what happened. The Lord volunteered to do what He did, with no one asking Him to do it. He knew neither the mother nor her son, but was moved by her suffering, so He came foreword uninvited to help. He has not changed, so He is equally willing to help you in the time of your suffering. One day, He

told His disciples that the Father knows what you need before you ask Him, which translates to the fact that He often grants us what we need without us asking for it. I am sure He has done this with every one of us. Just go back in your memory, try to remember those favors that God has done for you without asking for anything.

Have you ever narrowly escaped a disaster? Have you ever watched everyone around you fail, and you miraculously made it? Do you remember any desperate situation that you were in, in which you lost every hope, and suddenly, out of the blue sky, you were saved? My friend, nothing comes from the blue sky except God. Some, when they experience these situations, explain it by describing it as a coincidence. My dear reader, in God's dictionary there is no such word. He controls everything that happens, especially to those who know God. Do you think it was a coincidence that the Lord met the young man's funeral? Of course not, He planned it, and the timing had to be perfect. If He had been a few minutes late or early, He would have missed the chance to raise the young man.

He had compassion

The Bible explains that He did it because He had compassion for the mother. There is nothing unusual about this, because the Lord felt compassion for every person who suffered for any reason. The uniqueness here was that He felt a greater measure of compassion than usual, because this case touched Him personally. The woman was a widow, who lost her only son, who had died and left her alone in the world. This must have reminded Him of His own mother, who was also a widow (St. Joseph had died a few years earlier), and who would go through a similar experience later when Jesus would die on the cross. There is another unique feature of this miracle. In most of the miracles that Jesus performed, He required a measure of faith as a prerequisite for doing them. This time He did not require anything, He just did it.

Beside the unique aspects of this miracle, we find that it shares a few common features with the other two miracles in which the Lord raised

someone from death. In all of them, He faces death. He not only used His powers to ease the pain and suffering over the loss of a loved one, but He also confronted the forces of evil, represented by sin and death, with the force of righteousness. It was a confrontation between the force of darkness that introduced death into the world, and the force of eternal life exemplified in our Lord. His action to raise the dead was a symbol of His triumph over sin and death. He was demonstrating to His disciples and to the whole world an important spiritual reality; that “he who believes in Me, although he is dead, yet he will live.”

The Lord said to the widow, 'do not weep'. He wanted her to see that He who told her not to weep is the only one in this universe who can and will end her suffering, because He can and will take away the reason for her weeping. He is the only one who can really comfort her, not like the others who have been with her since her son died, and who were unable to bring her comfort. He is telling us today that the widow was grieving over the physical death of her son. You should not do that. The physical death is inevitable, and you should accept it. What you should really mourn is the spiritual death.

Many parents have their priorities confused. They mourn more when their children fail in school, than when they fail in their relationship with God. Some may ask; “Are you telling us that we should not be concerned about the failure of our children in worldly matters, or the death of a loved one?” No, I am not saying that, I am saying that we have to consider the spiritual failure or death as more important. Of course when a loved one dies, we are going to mourn, but we have to remember that we should not mourn as those who have no hope.

Death now is not the enemy it used to be. For the true Christian, it is the door that transfers him from this miserable life, to a life with God, the saints, and the angels. Some people exaggerate their grief over the death of somebody they loved, to the extent that they stop living their own lives, and live solely for the memory of the deceased, mourning him day and night. I knew a couple who had one son and two daughters. They were all grown. One son got sick and, after a brief

illness, died at the age of twenty-seven years. You cannot imagine the grief that the parents felt and how long it lasted. They continued to talk about their son. They enlarged his pictures, and put them everywhere in the house. They refused to smile or laugh. They refused to visit their friends and relatives. They wore black until they died. They covered almost everything in the house with black; the sofas, the chairs, the beds, the pillows, even the tables.

In my opinion, these people were not grieving for their son. They were rebelling against God's decision to end the life of the person they loved. These people, and those who exaggerate their grief, forget a very important fact; life and death are the exclusive domain of God. No one can claim that they are not. Some may feel that the mother in today's episode was justified in her intense grief, not only because she lost her only son, but also because he was so young. Many parents are shocked when they lose a young son or daughter. And sometimes they blame no one else but God.

I realize that this is a devastating experience, but we have to remember the sovereignty of God. Nobody has the right to question His decisions. And since we know that He loves us so much, we have to accept those decisions, whether we like them or not. If we are sure of His love, we should not ask "Why is this happening to us?" Or have we forgotten that St. Paul said "All things work together for good for those who love God?" (Rom 8:28) We may not see that good immediately, but eventually we will, and what looked like a disaster at the time it happened, will turn out to be a blessing. Yes, we have to accept that young people die too. They are not immune from death. Why does God take them at this tender age? We don't know, but we are sure that He has a very good reason for what He decides to do. The bottom line in all this is that we have to trust Him, and surrender our lives to Him.

He loves to see you weep

It is interesting that while the Lord ordered the widow to stop weeping, He loves to see you weep, but for another reason. The only

thing that is worth weeping for, in God's opinion is your eternity. He is happy every time a sinner weeps over his sins. King David, repenting of his sins of murder and adultery, wrote, "Every night I flood my bed with tears, I drench my couch with my weeping." (Ps 6:6) These are the tears of repentance, which God likes to see in His children, because they are the sign that tell Him, that even when they sin, they still love Him.

9. RAISING LAZARUS

When He heard, He stayed two days longer in the Place where He was

As we read the story of raising Lazarus, we find ourselves thinking about another miracle performed by our Lord during His brief stay on our planet. But is it just another miracle? The Lord performed some forty miracles recounted in the four gospels. This is not counting those mentioned as a group when one of the Gospel writers added, "and He healed all those who were sick" (Mt 8:16) without detailing their numbers nor the sicknesses that they suffered from.

The question often asked when this miracle is mentioned, is "Where does it stand when compared with the other miracles that our Lord performed?" A few Bible scholars hesitate to make this judgment, out of fear that doing so would force them to relegate any of our Lord's miracles to an inferior position to even another of His miracles. To me this is an unwarranted fear.

Excepting the personal miracles such as His birth, His resurrection, His ascension, and His transfiguration, the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead is widely considered as His greatest miracle. The reason is simply this; death was and still is considered the greatest of mankind's enemies, something that no human being is able to conquer. Only two men in the history of man have escaped its lethal grip; Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kin 2:11), and these will taste death when the Lord comes again. So conquering death should be rated at the top of all the miracles performed by our Lord. We all

know that He raised three people from death; the widow's son, the daughter of Jairus, and Lazarus. When we compare those three, we find that the Lord raised the first two on the same day they died, but Lazarus was raised after he had been buried for four days. His body had begun to decompose to the extent that Martha warned the Lord when He ordered that the stone be removed, saying, "Lord, there will be an odor for he has been dead for four days." (Jn 11:39)

As we reflect on the details of this unusual miracle, we find many questions that the Bible does not answer. The first of these is why did the Lord delay his trip to Bethany, when He received the message that the two sisters sent to Him, "Lord, he whom you love is sick"? (Jn 11:3) The Bible tells us that He delayed his response, and gave His disciples a reason when He told them after he received the news, "this illness is not unto death, it is for the glory of God." (Jn 11:4) This meant that when the Lord raised him from the dead, many people would realize that He is the Son of God, the long awaited Messiah, and will believe in Him. And this happened, as reported by St. John when he wrote, "Many of the Jews, who had come with Mary, and had seen what He did, believed in Him" (Jn 11:45) and then he wrote that the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered as a result of that, and after considering the miracle, they concluded, "this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." (Jn 11:48)

But this does not really reveal the other reasons behind our Lord's decision to wait. Mary and Martha must have wondered why, they were probably disappointed when he did not come to heal their brother and left him to die. After his death, they hoped that He would at least attend the funeral, but He did not do that either. Finally He showed up after Lazarus had been dead for four days. The Bible tells us that when the news that Jesus had come to the burial site, only Martha bothered to go and meet Him. Mary was probably too mad at Him for not showing them or their dead brother any courtesy.

If you have been here, my brother Would not have died

Some say that He did this to test Mary and Martha's faith, a test that they both failed. Martha told the Lord, when she saw Him, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died". This meant that she believed that had Jesus come when Lazarus was sick, He would have been able to heal him, but now that he is dead, and had been buried for four days, there is no way He would be able to do anything about it. Mary said the same thing to Him when she finally showed up at the urging of her sister. They probably talked about what happened and their disappointment in the Lord when He did not show up to heal their brother. So both sisters did not have too much faith in our Lord's ability to raise their brother from the dead. This becomes even more obvious when the Lord told Martha that her brother will rise, she answered "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (Jn 11:24) So testing the sisters' faith was not our Lord's purpose from delaying his response to their message, because He knew that they would fail the test. And we know that God does not enjoy seeing his children fail. He once allowed one of His favorite people, Job to be examined but He did it because He knew that he would pass the test.

A good guess at the real reason behind the delay is that the Lord wanted to strengthen Mary and Martha's faith. Let me explain. If Jesus had responded to the first call and rushed to Bethany, and healed Lazarus from his sickness, the two sisters would have been satisfied, and their faith in the Lord would have grown a little. And if He had showed up the same day he died, and raised him, they would have been happy, and their faith would have been strengthened a little bit more. But the Lord showed up after Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days, and had begun to smell. Despite this and against all odds, He raised him from the dead. This was an act that surpassed all their expectations, an act they never dreamed could happen, and an act that restored their faith in their rabbi friend. Just imagine the ecstasy they must have felt as they saw their dead brother come out wrapped from his coffin when the Lord called, "Lazarus come forth".

This definitely strengthened their faith by leaps and bounds. So our Lord delayed His going to Bethany not to test Mary and Martha's faith but to give it a big boost.

Another reason for the delay was to give the Jewish people a better chance to believe in Him. St. John mentions that as a result of this miracle, many believed in Him. The Pharisees and the scribes were notorious in denying His miracles and attempted to persuade those who received them to admit that they had never happened (as was the case of the man who was born blind). Failing to do this, they explained them by bizarre explanations (as was the case when they claimed that Jesus cast out evil spirits with the help of Baalazabul). They may have denied the other two miracles in which He had raised the widow's son, and Jairus' daughter, claiming that they were not dead, but had faked it to give the people the false impression that they were raised from the dead. In Lazarus' case our Lord did not want to leave any room for denials or false interpretations. So He chose to allow His friend not only to die and be buried, but to stay in his grave four days, and for his body to smell, so that there will be no doubt in anybody's mind that he had really died, and that he was raised from the dead.

Another reason was His desire to teach His followers that calamity, disaster, and suffering can and will strike even those who are very close to God's heart. Lazarus was one of His best friends and one whom He loved dearly. But He allowed sickness to befall him, allowed death to conquer him, and for him to remain dead for four days. When this happened, Mary and Martha must have lost faith in Him. They could not imagine that God will strike their righteous brother that early in his life, and that His prophet (at this point in time they at least considered Jesus to be a prophet) would refuse to use the supernatural powers that they knew He had, to heal him. But after what happened they probably learned the lesson that this could happen to anyone no matter how righteous he was. This is the lesson that the Lord wanted Mary and Martha to learn, and He wants you to learn it too.

"Where have You laid him?"

As we follow the story as reported by St. John, we find another incident that needs explanation. After the exchange between the Lord and the two sisters, He asked them where did they bury him.

Again we ask, "Didn't He know the answer? If He did, why did He ask?" This is another example of the questions that God asks man on various occasions, despite the fact that He knows the answer. He asked Adam after he ate of the forbidden fruit, "Where are you?" In this case, He probably wanted to remind him of what he had done, and thereby give him a chance to repent and apologize for it. But Adam did not take advantage of the opportunity that God gave him. He not only refused to repent and apologize, blaming himself for what happened, but he blamed God. He told Him that the reason for what he did was none other than "the woman that you gave me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Gen 3:12) In today's episode, the reason behind the Lord's question is not as clear. He may have asked the question to attract the attention of all those present that Lazarus is really dead and buried. He may have wanted to teach them that when they need God's help, they have to do what they can to help.

This was also evident in His request for them to remove the stone. These were two things they could do, and He wanted them to do them. This is something that He wants us also to learn. So when we go to Him with our requests in prayer, He wants us to realize that we have to do that which is possible for us. We have to do our share, and He will do His. He wants us to rely on ourselves as much as we are able, and after we do all that is possible, He will finish the job and do the impossible. Certainly, the people in today's story could tell Him where Lazarus was buried, they could also roll the stone from the grave, but they could not raise Lazarus from the dead. But after they did what they could, the Lord came and raised him.

Jesus wept

These two words express a very unique part of the story of raising Lazarus from the dead. It is unique because Jesus wept at none of the

other miracles of raising the dead. None of the prophets who raised people from death was reported to have wept. Keep in mind that while human beings performed those miracles, this one's uniqueness is even more evident as none other than God in the flesh performed it. As we think about this we find ourselves asking the following questions: Do we comprehend its full meaning? Why did it happen? Do we really know our God who weeps when His friend has died even though He knows that He will raise him in a few minutes?

As we reflect on this, we find that it surprises us because Jesus is God, and God does not weep. Our image of God before Jesus came to us was that of a strong and strict master who demands obedience and who severely punishes those who disobey Him. He was seen as an aloof and cold creator who asks for loyalty and who did not hesitate to destroy people by the thousands when his anger was unleashed on them. Man knew God as an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-capable God, who certainly has no weakness. And since we associate weeping with weakness, we are surprised when we read that He wept. It is true that when Jesus came He gave us another picture of what God is really like, which is quite different from the one we just described. Several times He told His disciples that the Father is a kind, loving, and forgiving father. He not only talked about God's qualities but He demonstrated them in His own behavior. He was gentle, loving, compassionate, never hurt any one, and who went around doing good to everyone who asked Him. Still Jesus is God, when we read that He wept, we are surprised.

Again the question is why? The answer is not clear. If you consider that He was the one who engineered the whole episode, who ordered Lazarus' sickness, and who allowed Him to die and to remain in the grave four days. If all this is true and He knew that He was going to raise him from the dead, why did He weep?

The Bible is silent on this and hundreds of other questions that people have asked since they have known God. We find that by and large He does not explain His actions to mankind. There are very few examples

in which He chose to share the reasons behind His behavior with man. The life of Abraham provides examples of both.

When God told Abraham to leave his home, his people and relatives, and follow Him into the land that He will show him in order to make him a great nation, Abraham must have wondered why can't He make me a great nation right here, next to my family and relatives?

Abraham did not dare ask God that question, and God never revealed the answer to him. This was God's common behavior; He gave orders or directions, but did not tell man the rationale behind them. In a few cases He shared with man the reasons for His decisions. A good example of this is when He visited Abraham with the two angels. During that visit God told Abraham that he would have a son, a promise that He had made to him before but neither Abraham nor his wife Sarah believed it. After the two angels left to go to Sodom, and Gomorrah to destroy them, God began to tell Abraham what He intended to do to the two cities, and why. He even allowed Abraham to bargain with Him about the number of righteous people He would accept to spare the two cities the destruction, which was waiting for them.

Going back to the reason or reasons behind our Lord's weeping; we have to guess, using our knowledge of Him, in order to avoid wild guesses that are not in agreement with His character. We can say that the first reason was His tremendous ability to empathize with people. That includes everyone, whether He knew them before or not. So when He saw someone happy for a good reason, He was happy, and when He saw someone suffering, He suffered. When He saw the widow of Nain weep, despite the fact that He had never seen her before, the Bible tells us that He had compassion on her, told her to stop weeping and raised her son from the dead.

So when He saw Mary and Martha and their friends weeping, sympathizing with them, He wept. This also revealed His perfect humanity. He, the Son of God, was a man even though he was God. Because of this, He suffered all the human weaknesses that we all

suffer. He felt fatigue, He experienced hunger, Satan tempted him, He was sad often, He was joyful sometimes, and He felt pain. He was in all respects like us but without a sin.

Another possible reason for His weeping was His sadness over His beloved man's behavior, the lack of faith in Him, and stubbornness and defiance which he had shown since he was created. Our Lord was reported to have wept twice, once at Lazarus' tomb and the second over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In that instance, the reason behind his weeping is revealed by what He said afterwards. He said His famous words about the future of the city He loved, and which He had to destroy because of its sinfulness. He mourned the city which refused to accept Him saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killer of prophets, stoner of those who were sent to you! How many times have I tried to gather your children together as the hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you did not want, behold your house is left to you in ruins." (Mt 23:37) On that day He was sad because of the lack of faith that His people showed in Him. It is not farfetched to assume that when He wept at Lazarus' tomb, He was also sad because the lack of faith shown by two of the people closest to His heart.

He may have wept to continue to confuse Satan about His identity. As we mentioned before Satan was there when God told the serpent in Gen.3: 15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed, he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." So from that time he watched all men to see who would bruise his head. Jesus did not want Satan to recognize Him. This is why He did and said many things that confused Satan about His identity, (which are detailed in other parts of this book). We think that His weeping in today's episode may have been partially motivated by this too.

What are miracles?

Miracles are observable phenomena that cannot be explained by our present knowledge, or that defy or violate one of the laws of nature, as discovered by man using the scientific method. When people hear of

miracles, whether recent and reported by a friend or a relative, or historic and recorded either in the Bible or some other book, they react in many different ways. Some deny them without any discussion. These either do not believe in God, or believe in a god on their level. So if He does something they cannot understand or explain, they refuse to believe it on the grounds that it is impossible. There is a strange and twisted kind of logic behind their position. Believing in a god implies that he is a superior being to those who believe in him, and consequently should be able to do things that his worshipers cannot do. It makes no sense for people to deny that their god can perform miracles because they cannot understand them, while considering him a god because he can. This is like calling a bird like the pigeon that can find its way back home from long distances a homing pigeon, and then when seeing it perform that feat, denying it because we do not understand it. People who deny miracles often hide behind what they call common sense, or the scientific way of thinking. They say if science cannot explain something, we have to be extremely skeptical about it. They often mention some people's tendency to exaggerate what they see or hear if it coincides with what they believe or want to believe. There may be some truth to that. This is why the church leadership always carefully examines any claim that a new miracle has happened before it grants credence to it and announces it to the public. When we say denial we are not talking about the scrutiny of some miracles, but we are talking about the rejection of all miracles on the basis that they do not fit into the known knowledge that man has accumulated so far.

There is a strange kind of logic behind this position. Let me explain. It is known that science does not know everything to be known about the universe. No scientist who is worthy of the title will deny that. They all concede that there is an awful lot that we do not know about the universe in which we live. So on what basis do some who call themselves scientists, deny something because their incomplete knowledge cannot explain it? Do they ever think of the possibility that the clue to those "impossible" things may lie in those facts that they do not know?

The word "miracle" as we use it, is a relative term. In other words, someone may observe something and consider it a miracle, while someone else may observe the same thing and not see anything miraculous about it. The reason for this lies in the degree in which their respective knowledge can explain what they have observed. Let me give you an example. We do not consider the telephone, the television, the computer, or a host of other modern inventions miracles. But if you were to show any of these to a man who have lived all his life in one of the many isolated and primitive societies that still exist today, and he has never seen any of these inventions before, he would definitely call them miracles, for the simple reason that he does not have the knowledge that enables him to understand them. Man is in the same position when he observes something that God has made. If he has the knowledge that helps him understand it, he does not call it a miracle, but if he runs into something that he does not possess the knowledge to understand, he could call it a miracle but to deny it, is unscientific and downright arrogant.

The arrogance here is the verdict, because when man does this, he is really saying that he has the intelligence to understand God. To me this is the height of arrogance. If we often fail to understand some of our fellow men, how can we claim that we can understand God? Man does not come with these idiotic conclusions by himself. Satan is always willing and ready to help us see all the inconsistencies in God's behavior, all the injustices that He has committed throughout history, and all the ridiculous beliefs that He wants us to believe. So in this case he probably tells man something like this, "Wasn't God the one who created you different from the rest of His creation? Wasn't He the one who gave you more intelligence than all the other creatures and the One who allowed you to use that superior intelligence to discover all this knowledge? Why is He now telling you to forget all that, and to believe something that your knowledge and intelligence cannot figure out?"

Do miracles still happen today?

The answer is a resounding YES. Of course not everyone has received or witnessed a miracle, but miracles do happen. One of the interesting things about this is that every church claims that miracles happen among its congregation, and have no difficulty recognizing any claim after some kind of scrutiny of what has been reported. But when they hear about a miracle outside their church, they show a great deal of skepticism. It is as if they are saying that their church is the only church that is accepted by God, to the exclusion of all others. I say this from personal experience. Since I came to this country in 1955, I have known hundreds of people in almost every walk of life scattered among more than half a dozen denominations. These include clergy, laymen of all kinds of occupation. When talking to these people, many of them say that they have witnessed a miracle either happening to them or to a member of their family. As I listened to their stories I deliberately showed my enthusiasm and my utter belief in what they were saying, but when I began to share with them some of the miracles that happened in our church, they showed signs of boredom, and an unequivocal disbelief.

An example of this is what happened in 1968. On April 2, 1968, St. Mary the mother of God began to appear on top of a small church that carries her name in a suburb of Cairo, called Zeitoun. She continued to appear for three years. Her appearances used to last for hours sometimes. Millions of people saw her including the president of Egypt at that time; Gamal Abdel Nasser, and her appearance was accompanied by hundreds of miracles happening to both Copts, and Moslems. Newsmen and reporters from many countries came and saw her, but those who acknowledged her appearance as authentic were very few. The New York Times reported the appearance two times each in one column, not as something that happened and verified but as something that some people claim happened.

If an objective observer compared her apparition in Egypt with that which happened before, he has to conclude that there is no comparison. There were three apparitions by St. Mary before that, the first in a church in Lourdes, France on February 11, 1885. The second was in the village of Fatima in Portugal in the year 1917. The third

was in Jerusalem on June 21, 1954. In each one of these apparitions St. Mary appeared for a few minutes, and was sometimes seen by only a few people. Despite that their response, their enthusiasm and the coverage that those apparitions received was phenomenal. It was much stronger and more extensive than what her apparition received in Egypt, to the extent that the Copts of Egypt saw clearly that bias can exist in the church even in acknowledging and reporting such a holy phenomenon as the apparition of St. Mary.

Our church is one of the richest churches as far as miracles are concerned. They happen almost every day, at the hands of priests, and sometimes without their help. Among these are healing all kinds of diseases, casting out evil spirits, and different apparitions, including apparitions by saints, angels, and our Lord Himself. There are even some bodies of ancient saints in some of our monasteries, which are still as fresh as if they were still alive. We believe that such happenings are God's way of helping His people maintain their faith especially during these difficult times in which many things are challenging people's faith in God.

Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

Why did the Lord pray before raising Lazarus? St. John tells us that He prayed before raising Lazarus. As far as we know He did not pray before any of the other miracles, so why did He pray this time? As we read the prayer we get an idea of the reason behind it. Listen to what He said as reported by St. John, "And Jesus lifted His eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that you have sent me." (Jn 11:42) A question that could be asked here is whether the people heard that prayer, or did our Lord not intend for them to hear it, because it was a privileged communication between the Son and the Father? We believe that the people heard it; otherwise it would have been impossible to quote it verbatim as St. John did.

Most likely our Lord wanted to demonstrate to the people there, and possibly to the rest of the Jewish nation, that He is not an imposter. When He says that He is the Son of God, He is justified to call Him "Father", and that He and the Father are one. Please notice that He thanked the Father because He hears Him always, not sometimes but always. He wanted the people to hear that, so they will believe that God is the one who sent Him. It is interesting to note that Jesus did not pray to ask the Father for power to raise Lazarus, or to raise him himself, but said, "I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that You have sent me".

10. HEALING THE INVALID

Only St. John mentions this miracle. Why? We don't know, but it may have happened on one of the Lord's trips early in His ministry, before He had invited some of the other disciples to follow Him. Or it may have happened on one of the trips that the Lord made, and took with Him a few of His favorite disciples, one of whom was certainly St. John.

St. John writes that as the Lord was visiting a site next to one of the gates of Jerusalem, called the "The Sheep Gate", beside a pool called Bethzatha, He saw a man, an invalid, who has been sick for thirty-eight years. The site, which our Lord visited on that day, was a very unusual place. The Bible tells us that there were five porches around the pool, and that they were filled with people suffering from every kind of disease. The reason is that from time to time, God sent one of His angels to stir the water, and the first one who got in the pool was instantly healed from whatever disease he had.

As we reflect on this, we find a few interesting revelations. First, we notice that this was happening before Jesus began His ministry. It happened during those four hundred years in which God did not communicate with the Israelites. He may have stopped communicating with the Jewish leadership, but He chose to keep the channels of communication between Him and the people open, by

doing something like sending His angel to stir the water once in a while. He was really telling the poor, the afflicted, and the sick, that I still remember you, I still love you, and I am here to help you. Second, as we think about the conditions that God put for His gift of healing to be administered, we find that every time only one was healed, and that one had to be the first in the pool after the angel stirred the water.

Why? We ask. It seems that God wanted those sick people to think about what was happening. He wanted them to be motivated enough to move fast. He wanted them to know that man has to do what he is supposed to do before he can ask for God's help. Man has to do the possible that he can handle, before he can ask the Lord to do the impossible, which he cannot handle. As this had become a contest of who will be conscientious enough to get in the water first, the inevitable result was to limit the healing to only one person each time. The obvious benefit to those who went to the site was to be physically healed, but the more important benefit was a spiritual one, which was finding God. Just imagine the unique experience of getting healed by divine intervention. How would it feel? What can one think about a God, who sends His angel to heal? Can one help feeling eternally grateful to such a loving God?

Jesus chose to visit that site for reasons that He did not reveal to anyone. But most likely He did it for the sole purpose of healing the invalid who had been sick for thirty-eight years. St. John does not mention that He healed any other person during His visit, so we can safely assume that He didn't. Again, we can only guess why He chose that person. He may have been the worthiest person to be healed. But he had problems that prevented him from getting the healing he deserved, so Jesus, knowing those problems, took time to go to him and lend him the helping hand that would grant him the healing that, for many years, he had craved and hoped for. In doing this He was rewarding him for his faith, his perseverance, and his patience. And He is telling us today, that if we have those excellent qualities that this poor invalid had, we too can look forward to our reward.

Another valid point is that the man never dreamed that God Himself would be the one who heals him. He never thought that God knew him, and that He would come especially to heal him. You too may feel this way, but as we watch the Lord taking the time to do what He did for that poor invalid, you may begin thinking differently. Once addressing a sinner, who felt unworthy to be loved by anyone let alone God, one of the saints said "Just imagine that if you were the only person on earth, and you needed salvation, the Son of God would not have hesitated for one moment, to come to the earth to save you".

St. John begins the story by saying that when the Lord reached the place; He found five porticoes full with hundreds of people inflicted with all kinds of diseases, invalid, blind, lame, and paralyzed. But out of these hundreds, He went directly to that invalid, and stopped before his bed. As He did this, the man must have looked at him. Our Lord's presence was ominous, and nobody could see and ignore Him. He had such a commanding presence that in every place, people's heads would turn, even before recognizing Him. And while He was not physically overpowering, nevertheless, his eyes and face must have radiated an unusual glow of love, and authority.

Do you want to be healed?

The Lord gazed at him intently as the invalid looked at Him. The man didn't know what to make of it, and before he could think of anything, he heard the kind and authoritative voice of our Lord, asking him, "Do you want to be healed?" (Jn 5:6) The man couldn't believe what he heard. He may have wondered, "What kind of question is that?" If I didn't want to be healed why am I here in the first place?" He may have thought that either Jesus was not familiar with the situation, or he is sick in the head. He looked at Him again, and found no evidence of this or that. He saw an unusual man looking at him with a mixture of compassion, and determination. He bottled his early impressions about Him, and began to explain to Him his dilemma.

He told Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me in the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down before

me." (Jn 5:7) The man was really telling the Lord, that I have been trying but because of my condition, I can't move fast enough, and so every time I try, someone else beats me. As we think of what he said, we find that the man by his own words had nobody to help him. No relatives, no friends. All have abandoned him. Maybe because he wasn't a nice or an easy person to deal with, maybe he was too demanding, maybe he had a sharp tongue. This may have been stirred in his memory as he began to talk to Jesus, about his problem. He may have felt sorry about what he had done and asked God to forgive him. As the Lord listened to the man's story, and knowing that he has been sick for thirty-eight years, He must have admired him. He must have admired his perseverance. He has been waiting for his miracle for a very long time, and never lost hope. Just imagine that you or I have been praying to God for something, and He chose not to grant it, would any of us have had such perseverance and patience to wait on God for thirty-eight years?

Most of us would abandon our prayers after some time, thinking either that they are unworthy to receive anything from God, or listening to God's enemy when he says, "God does not care about anybody but himself. So save your breath, he is not going to listen to you." But this man's faith was so strong that it endured thirty-eight years of frustration and failure. This man as he failed every time to get to the water must have thought, "One of these days, somebody will feel sorry for me and help me get to the water in time, and I will be healed." This wonderful combination of faith, hope, patience, and tenacity, were the reasons why our Lord admired him, and came to fulfill his hopes by healing him.

St. John tells us that after this the Lord told him, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk." (Jn 5:8) The man was not expecting that. He was totally taken by surprise. He had entertained one dream, and one dream only, all his life, to be thrown in the water after the angel moves it, but now some stranger is suddenly telling him to get up. He must have asked himself, "Who is this man who is asking me to do something I cannot do? I have never seen him before, and have not heard about him. Yet, He is asking me to rise. Doesn't He know that I

can't? I just told Him that, so why is He asking me to stand?" While these thoughts were going through his mind, he felt a sudden surge of energy in his body, and an urge to stand up. Looking at the Lord and seeing the most encouraging look that he had ever seen on His face, the invalid without too much effort shot up and stood on his own two feet. What happiness he must have felt. Here he is healed from that debilitating disease that had rendered him completely incapacitated for such a long time. He must have felt so on top of the world that he did not thank Jesus for what He had done for him, and neglected even to ask His name. He was so excited about what had happened to him, that after he stood up, he picked up his pallet and walked away.

The Bible tells us that it was the Sabbath when Jesus healed him. When the Pharisees saw the man carrying his bed, they stopped and questioned him, why was he carrying his bed on the Sabbath? Jesus was keenly aware of the severe criticism that He would get from the Scribes and the Pharisees, every time He healed somebody on that day. He was aware of the crime they would accuse Him of, which is the serious offense of breaking the Sabbath. So why did He insist on doing it over and over again? First He couldn't care less about man's opinion, especially those of the religious hierarchy of the Temple. He saw something wrong happening and those promoting it were the very people who were supposed to be the teachers of the people, so He decided to expose the wrong and correct it with His own behavior. Here we stop to ask how justified were these people in their accusations that He was breaking the Sabbath.

They say, "Wasn't He working when He healed that man, and God said in the fourth commandment, 'Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. In it you shall not do any work.'"(Ex 20:8) The Jewish nation under the leadership of the Scribes and the Pharisees had adopted a very rigid interpretation of the Law. And in regard to the Sabbath, they carried God's order to extremes, to the extent that they were arguing back and forth, about how much weight a person may be allowed to carry in his pocket on the Sabbath without being considered breaking the Sabbath.

They sought to make the Sabbath more rigorous than God intended it to be. So the Lord decided to correct that. As we study the Old Testament to understand what God meant by the fourth commandment, we find that from the very beginning it was made clear that the Sabbath was God's day. Man was told to remember that day, to refrain from any worldly activity, and worship God. God knew that man would be wrapped up in his mad pursuit of the world and the things of the world, to the extent that he will forget his Creator, and get farther and farther away from Him. In order to safeguard against this, God ordered man to set aside one day every week as a holy Sabbath to God, during which he will do no work, thereby giving himself a chance to remember his Creator, and examine his relationship with Him. Also the Sabbath was a day in which man was not supposed to do what pleases him, but what pleases God. The Lord pointed out to the Jews that their interpretation of the Sabbath was totally wrong. He told them that eating is allowed on the Sabbath even if the food is one of the grains that had to be plucked from the ear. Nor was it wrong to do good deeds on the Sabbath, such as healing a sick person.

One day, Jesus went to the Synagogue to preach, and among the people attending was a man whose right hand was withered. The Scribes and the Pharisees were watching, to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath or not. When He knew their thoughts, He called the man and asked him to stand in the middle so everybody could see him. Then directly to the Scribes and the Pharisees, He said, "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (Lk 6:18) Hearing no response from them, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand", and he did so.

When the Pharisees questioned the invalid, he told them that he did not carry his bed on his own, but that the man who healed him was the one who told him to carry it. Then they asked him, "Who is he?" He could not tell them, because he did not know that Jesus was the man who healed him. When the Pharisees asked the man who healed him, they were almost certain that it was Jesus, but they wanted the

information to come from the "Horse's mouth", from the person who was healed. This way, they can use him as a potential witness against Jesus when the time comes.

The story could have ended there, but the Lord didn't want that. He preferred another ending. A few days later, He found the man in the Temple, and said to him, "See, you are well now, Sin no more that nothing worse befall you." (Jn 5:14) He was telling him, that his sickness was caused by his sinful life, and that if he went back to his old ways, he will suffer more serious consequences. This was one of His usual recommendations when the person's problem was caused by sin. When He was called to judge the woman caught in the act, He asked, after all the people who wanted to stone her had left, "Woman, where are they? Has none condemned you?" She said, "No one Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I, go in peace, and sin no more." (Jn 8:3)

The Bible does not tell us whether the man heeded our Lord's advice or not. But it tells us what he did after that, he went to the Pharisees and told them that Jesus was the man who healed him and told him to carry his bed. As we stop to think about this, one cannot help feel that the man met our Lord's good deed, by telling on Him. He betrayed the man who healed him and gave him his health back. What he did was contemptible, and downright wrong. But this is what man always does in his relationship with God. After God brought the Israelites from Egypt, hitting their oppressors with ten powerful plagues, and defending them from Pharaoh's army which had pursued and caught them with their backs to the Red Sea, by splitting the waters of the Sea; what did the people of Israel do?

Did they obey their God who went to bat for them, and supported them in every way? The answer is a resounding NO. When Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, the chosen people of God made for themselves a golden calf, and worshipped it. So what the invalid man did was the typical behavior of fallen man. What is required from us here is not to derive satisfaction from condemning the man for what he did, but rather to watch our behavior

to see that we remain faithful to the Lord till the end. He once said, "He who endures till the end will be saved."

CHAPTER II

JESUS TALKS ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD

As we examine the life of Jesus on earth, we can clearly see that the over arching theme that dominates everything that He said or did, is the theme of the “Kingdom of God”, or the “Kingdom of Heaven” as He sometimes called it. The very first time those words were used was when John the Baptist came out of the wilderness to declare that “the Kingdom of God is at hand.” He also called the people to repent, and come back to God. Jesus repeated this same call when He began his ministry. It is as if both of them had agreed to begin their ministries with the same message. Some ask “Why this particular call?” They feel that there was a strong reason for its use.

The reason is that the people needed to hear about the kingdom, because it is the most important concept in the life of any human being and they were totally unfamiliar with it. Not once is this concept mentioned in any place in the Old Testament. From the very beginning, after Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were banished from the Garden of Eden, which was the Kingdom of God, this concept was never discussed with man. When God called Abraham to follow Him, He told him, “Go from your country, and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses I will curse, and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.” (Gen 12:1-4)

This was a call from God to Abraham to forge a relationship with Him, but if we examine the rewards that God promised, we find that all of them were earthly and physical. He promised to make his name great and to make him a great nation, to bless him and those who were friendly to him, and to curse those who were hostile to him. The word “bless”, which can mean spiritual gifts, was never understood that way, but was always interpreted to mean physical gifts. The Bible

tells us that Abraham was blessed by God, and as a result became very rich. The same story is repeated with Isaac, Jacob, and his children throughout history. The result was that mankind, including the chosen people of God, lived in pursuit of physical goods, not spiritual goods, and thought this was all there was. They were unaware of the existence of the Kingdom of God, while they were keenly aware of the existence of the kingdom of the world, which was the only reality they knew and experienced.

This is why both John and Jesus began their ministries by introducing the Kingdom of God to the people, since both were inviting them to become members of that kingdom.

Jesus spoke many times about the Kingdom of God, but He also demonstrated by the way He lived what it means to belong to that kingdom. He taught the people that there are conditions that they have to meet in order to be accepted in the Kingdom of God. Then He taught them by His example the attributes of the person who lives according to those conditions. As we examine the Bible, we find that the words “The Kingdom of God” are used sixty-nine times, and “The Kingdom of Heaven” thirty-two times in the New Testament, but not once in the Old Testament. Jesus Himself used most of these. He used them in two different ways. One was to describe it for His listeners, by telling them what it is like. The other use in his talks, declarations, and sermons indicates that this is the final goal of everything that man does.

What is the Kingdom of God like?

Before we get to specifics, we have to point out that Jesus always used parables when He spoke to the people about the Kingdom of God. He knew that if He spoke about it directly, the possibility of them understanding Him was remote. He was, as we said before, very much aware of their worldly orientation, their obsession with their physical existence, and ignorance of their spiritual life. So, being the best teacher that ever lived, He tried to simplify the facts about the Kingdom of God. There is nothing simpler and more understandable

than drawing analogies with familiar objects from their everyday life to bring their understanding of those spiritual facts as close to reality as possible.

One day, the disciples asked Him, “Why do You always speak to the people in parables?” They were probably comparing His words with those of the Old Testament prophets, who relayed God’s messages to the people verbatim. They may have felt that in those cases there was no confusion about what God ordered or said, while they saw that speaking in parables might confuse the people. They never thought that the Old Testament prophets could not change one word of what God told them. They were messengers who had to transmit the word of God as they received it, while Jesus was the Son of God and He had the privilege of shaping the message anyway He wanted.

God spoke in parables many times. In the Old Testament, He used parables to dramatize His message to the Israelites. Once He ordered His prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute. He told him, “Go take to yourself a wife of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord.” (Hos 1:2) Hosea obeyed God, and when he got his first born, God named him “Jezreel.” He explained that to him saying, “For yet a little while and I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.” (Hos 1:4) This was a parable that was pushed into action by God, something, in our knowledge, that did not happen with any other parable. By asking Hosea to do this, God wanted to dramatize His displeasure with Israel, and may be to test the loyalty of His prophet. As we know he passed the test with flying colors. He did exactly what the Lord asked him to do. After his first wife died, he was ordered to marry another prostitute, and he obeyed again.

A few parables were dreams that people had sent to them conveying a message from God. Joseph’s dreams, those of Pharaoh’s head waiter, and head baker were parables. Also those of Pharaoh and others were parables carrying a message from God. The whole Book of “Solomon’s Song” is a parable, in which the relationship between God and man was likened to that between a man and his wife. This is

why God called Israel a harlot when she went after other gods. Also many of the visions seen by some of the prophets such as Daniel, Ezeckiel, and St. John (in Revelations) could be considered parables. So, when Jesus spoke to the people in parables, He was continuing the tradition that the Father used in communicating with people. Still the disciples asked Him, why?

When they asked Him, He answered them saying, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given.” (Mt 13:11) When we hear this, we wonder if this is discrimination. It may appear that way, but when we think about it, we find that the explanation is simple. The disciples were entitled to know the secrets because they asked Him. The others were not because they did not ask. And we know that Jesus said many times to the people, “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to whom who knocks it will be opened.” (Mt 7:7-9)

1. The Sower Who Went Out to Sow

This is one of the very first parables that Jesus used to speak to the people about the Kingdom of Heaven. The Bible tells us that one day Jesus left His house in Capernaum and sat beside the Sea of Galilee. As soon as the people saw Him, they came in great numbers and gathered around Him. Then He got into a boat and began to teach them. He told them the parable of the sower. He said, “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched, and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Mt 13:3-9)

This is the only parable that Jesus explained. He did it because His disciples asked Him to. He said, “When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches what is sown in his heart; this is what was sowed along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no roots in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulations or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case hundred fold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” (Mt 13:19-23)

As we reflect on this parable, we find a few interesting conclusions. First, the sower even though Jesus identified him as Himself, can be anyone who is spreading the word of God. Second, we notice a difference between the sower in the parable and the sower in real life. The former was not as careful with the seeds as a real sower. He let some drop on the path, and some on rocky soil, and some on thorns. The sower in real life does not squander his seeds on the road or on rocky soil or on thorns. He not only sows his seed in good soil, but he also tries to improve that soil by loosening it and adding fertilizer, so it becomes more suitable for sowing.

The Lord chose a sower who sowed his seed on all the different kinds of soil, whether they can sustain them and give them the necessary nourishment so they can grow, or not. The idea here is that the word of God will be preached to all, regardless of their response to it. So no one will be missed. Some one may ask, “Why do this if God knows ahead of time who is going to accept His word, and who is going to reject it?” It seems that God wants to reach everyone so, when the Day of Judgment comes, man would have no excuse for rationalizing his sins by saying that the word did not reach him.

Another interesting conclusion is that the relatively small number of seeds that grew and reached the stage in which they were able to produce fruit were in only one site out of four. This means that only a fraction of those who hear the word of God will ever be more than listeners who by and large disregard what they heard. Jesus Himself hinted at this when He spoke about the two gates and the two ways available to man. He said, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find are few.” (Mt 7:13,14)

We can also identify another conclusion from what Jesus said to the disciples as He explained the parable to them. He mentioned three of the main reasons why people do not follow God.

The first is directly related to Satan, in which he snatches away the word of God as soon as it hits the ear. This happens to those who have dismissed God and His word as irrelevant to their life. They believe that either there is no God, or believe that God exists but only fools believe He is a good God. They say He is a selfish God, who is not interested in anyone but Himself, and who punishes man when he follows the needs that God created in him. They believe that He hates mankind as evidenced by the millions that He destroyed and the disastrous world in which we live. These are people who have made up their minds that they do not want to have any relationship with God, so when they hear the word of God, they allow Satan to pick it up.

The second reason given by Jesus in the case of the rocky soil was persecution or tribulation. He also states that these people do not have root in themselves. What does He mean by this? He gave the answer when He said that these people accept the word immediately with joy, which means that they did not carefully evaluate it before they accepted it. They made a snap decision, a superficial one, which does not go to the depth, but remains at the surface. This is why Jesus described them as “having no roots in themselves.” These people follow God, hoping that their life will be blessed. But when they

discover that tribulation and persecution are an important part of the package they accepted, but never expected, they quit.

The third reason mentioned by Jesus is “The cares of the world, and the delight in riches.” These are people who are obsessed with the world and the things of the world. These want to have the best of both worlds. They want to follow God, but they also want to enjoy the pleasures of the world. Jesus told the people many times that it is impossible to worship two gods. He specifically mentioned this in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon (which means wealth).” (Mt 6:24)

Another conclusion that we can draw from this parable is that those who accept the word of God will produce differently according to the talents they received from God and the effort that they put in. So, some will produce a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty. This means that those who decide to follow God will vary in their accomplishments. Some will be more successful than others. This should motivate all who commit their life to God, to try their best so they will produce a hundred-fold, and not to be satisfied with a lower return.

As we reflect further on this beautiful parable, we hear the question, which many people ask after they hear it, “What kind of soil is my heart?” When people ask this, they often wonder, “Who determines the kind of soil my heart is? What choices do I have, if I was created with one of the undesirable kinds of soil? Is it possible to change one kind of soil into another? Who will do that?”

To answer these questions, we can say that every one of us is born with a different package, which he inherits from his parents. We inherit a unique matrix of characteristics, different from everyone else, except in the case of identical twins. What do we exactly inherit? We inherit a number of needs (which were previously called instincts) that crave satisfaction, such as the need for food, the need for love

...etc. God created these needs in us to ensure that we will survive. Despite the fact that we are all born with these needs, it is a mistake to assume that we all have them at the same level of strength. The strength of those needs varies when we are born. This also applies to all other needs which we are born with, such as the need for warmth, for success, for belonging, for security, etc.

After this, and as we get older, the kind of environment (which means our parents, our brothers and sisters, our relatives, our teachers, our friends, the radio, television, printed word...etc), in which we live, will affect the way those inherited needs develop. Sometimes, this environment provides an atmosphere that directs these needs in a healthy way, and sometimes the opposite happens. So far, one can say that we are more or less subject to powers stronger than we are. It seems logical then that the kind of person I will become is totally out of my control. But it is not exactly true. We notice that, even as children, we respond differently to the same component of the environment. This proves that because we were created in the image of God and His likeness, we have been given a good measure of intelligence, which enables us to make choices. So our destiny is not totally controlled by what we inherit from our parents or by our environment, but by what we decide to do.

I will admit that some of us are luckier than others. Some of us born with an average level of needs, and an environment, which made it easy for them to make the right decisions, are luckier than those who were born with extreme needs or whose environment pushed them in the other direction. But every one of us has heard the word of God many times and has had chances to rearrange our priorities and follow God. This is why, even if heredity and environment have conspired to deal us an unfavorable package, we can still make up our mind to follow God. In this case, it makes little difference whether we have had a more or less favorable package. We all struggle. It may be that some of us will have to struggle a little more than others, but we will all struggle. And don't forget that it is the power of God, not our own, that we all need in our struggle with sin and without it no one can win. So, if we are serious about following God, and becoming one of

the citizens of His kingdom, it does not really matter which kind of soil our heart is right now. Even if it is of solid rock, God can change it into the most fertile soil. But we have to ask Him.

2. The Man Who Sowed Good Seeds in His Garden

In this parable, Jesus spoke about a typical farmer “who sowed good seeds in his garden, and while the men were asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, ‘Sir did you not sow good seeds in your field? How then has it weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But He said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds, you root out the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time, I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat to my barn.’ ” (Mt 13:24-30)

This parable can be considered as an extension of the previous parable. What Jesus showed in this parable, was that even the seeds which were sown in the good soil, did not escape an attempt by the farmer's enemy to ruin them. Simply sowing weeds among the wheat did this. This can be interpreted that Satan does not leave good people alone, but continues his efforts to win them to his side. One of the tricks that he uses is to plant weeds (which are useless and worthless ideas, such as worldly concerns and pursuits) in their minds, in the hope that these will sway them and make them follow them rather than following God. Another interpretation is that even if a family, a group, or a nation had been recruited for God, Satan will not hesitate to recruit some of them, to infect the rest and tempt them to go the other way.

The field used in this parable can be also interpreted as the world, and just as God is recruiting mankind to His kingdom, so does Satan. God is doing with mankind what the farmer told his servants when they

asked permission to pull out the weeds. He does not want this done, but allows them to grow together until harvest time. He leaves all of them, the good and the bad until harvest time, which is the time of their death and departure from this world. The reason here is to give those who have strayed a chance, up to the very last minute, to repent and go back to God. The history of the church tells us that there are a few who took advantage of this. The most famous is one of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus who asked Him to remember him when He comes into His Kingdom.

3. The Grain of Mustard

St. Matthew is the only one who mentions this parable. He writes, “Another parable He put before them, saying, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’ ” (Mt 13:31,32)

Again we see the Lord using a seed to draw an analogy between it and the Kingdom of Heaven. There are many reasons behind Jesus' fascination with seeds. First, the seed packs a lot of potential. As we compare the small and insignificant seed with the magnificent and towering tree that it produces, one can't but marvel at the difference. There is nothing anywhere in the world that comes even close, in which so much is packed in so little. The same is true with the Kingdom of Heaven, it is something you hear about, but once it grows, it will produce such profound changes in the life of a person that people will stand in awe of the magnitude of the change. A second similarity is the seed has the potential of producing life, but it needs certain conditions in order to release that potential. This is why the seed has been described as a “Shrine for Life”. The Kingdom of God is the same way. It has the potential of producing life, but it also needs certain conditions to release its potential, such as the love of God, faith, repentance, humility, and dependence on God and not on one's powers.

Another similarity is the fact that if you tamper with a seed, it will not produce life. The same applies to the Kingdom of God. If you change any of its qualities, if you believe some of its components and reject others, it will not produce life. You need to accept all of it as Jesus outlined it, for it to be effective in your life.

In this particular parable Jesus is talking about the mustard seed, which is so small that all the above qualities become more unbelievable and amazing. Jesus says that as God performs a miracle in making this tiny seed produce such a huge tree; He will perform a similar miracle in our lives once we become members of His kingdom. He will change us and make such a difference in our lives that those who observe us will marvel at the changes they see. He then mentioned that the birds of the air would come to that tree, and make their nests in it. This means that as the birds of the air found security and refuge in that tree, so will people find security and refuge in the Christian as he shows his love and concern for others.

4. The Leaven

St. Matthew also includes this parable, he writes, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.” (Mt 13:33)

As we reflect on this, we immediately remember that Jesus used the word “leaven” two times, in this parable and when He cautioned His disciples about the “leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” (Mt 16:6) It is interesting to note that Jesus used the same word with two different meanings. In this parable it was used as a good thing. It stood for the Kingdom of Heaven, and it was mentioned as an agent of change that when mixed with a lot of flour, the whole became leavened. In the other, it meant hypocrisy, a trait that the Pharisees and the Sadducees had, and Jesus was telling His disciples to be aware of it. This could be confusing to some. But, if you think about the role of leaven in both you will find that it can be either good or

bad. And Jesus was telling the people that as leaven spreads in the dough, so does the Kingdom of Heaven. Once someone accepts it, it will not sit idle, it will affect every facet of his life. It will do the same with groups of people, when one of them accepts it; there is a chance that the rest will too. Hypocrisy spreads the same way. This is why Jesus cautioned His disciples to be aware of it, because it is contagious. Unfortunately we all know that evil spreads much faster than good.

Leaven is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. The first time is in Exodus in relation to the Passover, when God told Moses, “They shall eat the flesh (of the sacrificial lamb) that night; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.” (Ex 12:8) This is repeated several times. (Ex 12:19, 13:7, 34:35; Lev 2:11, 6:17, 10:12) But in Leviticus 23:17, God ordered the Israelites to bring two loaves of leavened bread, as a cereal offering of the new grain, and present them to the Lord. So we can see again that on one occasion, the Passover, leaven was prohibited, yet on another it was permitted. Then we find that the leaven was also mentioned in the book of Amos. He wrote, “Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifice every morning, your tithes every three days; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!” (Am 4:4, 5)

The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century BC, and God called him to condemn the Jewish people for their defiance of His commandments. In the above statement he is describing their behavior, as dictated to him by God. The mention of the leavened bread here again reiterates that God allowed it along with tithing and offering sacrifices as mentioned by Amos. God was telling the people that even when they do what the commandments ordered, they do it only for the purpose of publishing it, and touting it before others, and that is not good.

St. Paul also writes about leaven, and used the word the same way Jesus used it when He spoke about the leaven of the Pharisees. He

writes in his epistle to the Corinthians, “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you are really unleavened.” (1Cor 5:7)

5. The Hidden Treasure

In this parable Jesus makes the analogy that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, “which a man found and covered up; then in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field.” (Mt 13:44)

There are a few interesting observations that one can make as we read this parable. The first, most of mankind still fails to see; the Kingdom of Heaven is the most precious thing that anyone can find. The second is that the man found it, which means that he was searching for something; he was pursuing something more important than all that he had. This is proven by his action after he found the treasure; for he sold every thing that he owned and bought the field. Third, the treasure is hidden, which means it will not be seen by many. Most are looking for something else, such as worldly goods, the lust of the flesh, or the pride of living. Jesus emphasized this when He said to the man born blind, “For judgment I came into the world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” (Jn 9:39)

The man who found the treasure went out and sold every thing that he had. Nothing is worth keeping, if it stands in the way that leads to eternity. Everything, no matter how much we love it, should be sacrificed for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Many may feel that this is too much to ask, but this is the way God will judge us. Did He come first in our lives, or did we value something else as more important than Him? He said it once very clearly, “He who loves father or mother, more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Mt 10:37)

Others may feel that to give up everything to gain the Kingdom of Heaven may sound easy, but is it really? There is no question, that

given our nature as earthly entities, further corrupted and made more carnal by our disobedience, the task is not only difficult, but seems impossible. The disciples made a response to Jesus to that effect, when He told them, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” (Mt 19:24) They asked, “Who then can be saved?” (Mt 19:25) Jesus answered them saying, “With men this is impossible, but with God every thing is possible.” (Mt 19:26) We have to know that no man can resist evil, or conquer sin by himself. The only hope we have is that God will help us, and as He conquered Satan, He stands ready to conquer him again for us. The only condition that God requires before He does this is that we ask Him for His help, which He will gladly give.

There is one difference between the treasure in the parable and the Kingdom of God. The parable says that when the man found the treasure, he covered it, so no one else would see it. He did not want to lose it, and if someone else saw it, they could possibly beat him to it. This is understandable because there was only one treasure, which only one person could possess. But the Kingdom of God is not that way. Many can possess it at the same time, so whoever finds it will not cover it, but leaves it uncovered and calls others to see and possess it. When Jesus said that the man covered the treasure after he found it, He wanted to show its importance, and he did not want to take any chances. This is the attitude that God wants us to adopt when seeking the Kingdom of Heaven.

6. The Fine Pearl

This parable is the same as the last one. This time the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to a fine pearl that a merchant found, went out and sold every thing he had, and bought. Again, Jesus emphasized that the merchant was searching for pearls, and when he found this pearl he recognized its value, and sold all that he had to buy it. So, we have to search for God all the time, and when we find Him, we should not let Him go. We have to cling to Him, as Jacob did and told Him, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” (Gen 32:26) God wanted to get away from Jacob. Fortunately He does not want to get away from us

now. So after we find Him, He will never abandon us. It is we who abandon Him

7. The Net

Another analogy that Jesus used to describe the Kingdom of Heaven is a net. St. Matthew writes, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into the vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Mt 13:47-50)

In this parable, Jesus is talking about the last days, when the righteous will be rewarded and the evil will be punished. He simplified this difficult concept, by using something that people see fishermen do all the time, the act of sorting fish. He told them, possibly for the first time, that evil people will be punished for their rebellion against God. This was not clearly and unequivocally presented in the Old Testament. The word “hell” is an English translation of the Hebrew word “Sheol”. But as we survey the verses with this word in the Old Testament, we find that it appears 32 times in the following books: Deuteronomy, 2 Samuel, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Amos, Jonah, and Habakkuk. It does not appear in the books of Exodus or Leviticus, the two books in which the Law was recorded. A sampling of a few verses will explain why we said that the punishment of the evil doers is not clearly outlined in the Old Testament. The first time the word “Sheol” appears in the Old Testament is in the Book of Deuteronomy, when Moses spoke to the people of Israel before his death. He said, “They have stirred me to jealousy with what is no god; they have provoked me with their idols. So I will stir them to jealousy with those who are no people. I will provoke them with a foolish nation. For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol.” (Deut 32:21, 22) Moses was telling the Israelites that their deeds had made God angry, and that His anger burned to the depths of Sheol, an expression intended to show

the strength of His anger. There is no mention here of Sheol as the final place for evil people.

The second time the word appears is in the second book of Samuel, on the tongue of David, after God delivered him from the hands of all his enemies. He said, “The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, My stronghold and my refuge, my savior, you saved me from violence. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. For the waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of perdition assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me.” (2 Sam 22:2-6) Here too, even though the word is used, there is no connection between it and evil. It was used by David to describe the depth of his desperate situation before God delivered him from the hands of his enemies.

The third time the word appears is in the Book of Job, in one of the speeches that Zophar the Naamathite directed toward Job. He said, “For you say, ‘My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes.’ But, oh that God would speak and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding; know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves. Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than Heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?” (Job 11:4-8)

Here again the word is used to designate a place, which is so low that there is no other place that is lower, just as Heaven is used to designate a place so high that there is no other higher place. But again there is no connection between this place and the eternal abode of evil people.

Another place the word appears is the Book of Psalms. David uses it several times in Psalms 9, 16, 18, 55, 86, 116, and 139. As we examine these, we find all but one fail to identify the word “Sheol” as

the place where the evil people will eventually go.

In Psalm 16, “For you did not give up to Sheol, or let your godly one see the pit” (Ps 16:10), David was making a prophecy about Jesus’ resurrection. In Psalm 18, he writes, “The cords of Sheol entangled me.” (Ps 18:5) We explained this above. In Psalm 55, he writes, “Let death come upon them, let them go down to Sheol alive.” (Ps 55:15) Here he was talking about his enemies and his wishes on their behalf. In Psalm 86:13, he writes, “You have delivered my soul from the depth of Sheol.” In Psalm 116:3, he writes, “the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me”, and in Psalm 139:8, “If I ascend to Heaven, you are there, if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” The only place that makes the connection between Sheol and doing evil is Psalm 9:17, when David wrote, “the wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.”

Sheol is also used in the Book of Isaiah. As we examine it, we find that he does not clarify the connection between Sheol and evildoers. In Isaiah 5:14 he writes, “Therefore my people go into exile for want of knowledge; their honored men are dying of hunger and their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite, and opened its mouth beyond measure.” Here the prophet is describing how his people are suffering under the rule of Assyria. The word “Sheol” is used here to show how low the condition of the people has become. The other verses, in which the word appears, are 14:9; 28:15, 18; and 57:9. In none of these do we find any connection between Sheol and the fate of evil people.

The Book of Ezekiel mentions the word Sheol, but as we examine what he wrote, we find that here again the connection is not clear. For instance he wrote in chapter 31, “I will make the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol.” Here he was talking about Lebanon, and prophesying that it will be ruined. In chapter 32:21, 27, we find a similar prophecy about Egypt.

In the Book of Amos, he wrote, “Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them, though they climb up to Heaven, from

there I will bring them down.” (Am 9:2) Here the Lord was talking about His enemies and was using Sheol and Heaven as two places that the enemy may try to go to, to flee from God's wrath.

In the Book of Habakkuk, we find one verse that mentions the word, “The arrogant man shall not abide. His greed is as wide as Sheol.” (Hab 2:5) We can easily see that the word is not used to mean the permanent residence of evil people. It is used to describe the magnitude of the greed of the arrogant, presumably because it is big.

The last Book that mentions the word is the Book of Jonah. He writes, “I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried.” (Jon 2:2) Here we also fail to find the connection that we have been looking for. Jonah was describing the belly of the whale where he called out to God, as the belly of Sheol.

The conclusion is that for an unknown reason, God did not give the Israelites much information about the final destiny of the people who refuse to obey Him. May be He didn't because He knew that even by using their immediate needs, they will refuse to listen, and concluded that telling them about heaven and hell would not have made any change in their behavior. But Jesus did, because He wanted man to know everything about his future, so he would not say on the Day of Judgment, “Nobody told me.”

Spiritual Facts relevant to the Kingdom of Heaven

As we have mentioned, Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of Heaven several times and attempted to describe it to the Israelites using parables. He also tried to explain the spiritual facts, which are an important part of it. As we scan the New Testament we find that there are 69 occasions in which He did this. In the remaining pages of this chapter we are going to mention the most important ones and explain them.

1. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” (Mt 6:33)

From this we can conclude that we have to seek the Kingdom of God, and that it is a gift from God. No man can reach it without God's help. Jesus said this because man was asking God for material and worldly things, and nothing else. He was telling the people that their spiritual needs should take priority over their material needs. He said if you ask God for your spiritual needs, don't worry, God will give with them whatever you need physically, because He knows that you need these too.

2. “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Lk 18:24)

In this statement Jesus is making a new revelation about the New Kingdom that He was preaching. Rich people will have problems in attempting to follow Him. This was quite different from the old concept about worldly riches, which was held by the Israelites before Jesus. They were told that when they obeyed God, they would be blessed physically, and many got rich as a result. Now Jesus suddenly introduces a new fact, that rich people will have a difficult time getting to the Kingdom of God. This was baffling and many withdrew from following Him. The difference between the two points of view comes from the strong emphasis that Jesus put on the spiritual, sometimes at the expense of the physical.

3. “The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing fruits of it.” (Mt 21:43)

This was a clear warning to the Jewish nation, that the Kingdom of God, which they thought would be theirs forever, would be taken away from them and given to others. St. John said it emphatically when he wrote, “He came to His own, and His own received Him not. But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become the children of God.” (Jn 1:11, 12)

4. “Woe to the world for temptations to sin. For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the man by whom the temptations come.” (Mt 18:7)

Here Jesus was stating a very important fact about the Kingdom of God. He was speaking about the obstacles that Satan will put in our way to divert us away from pursuing it. He used the word “necessary” in stating the inevitability of temptations. He could have said that they are inevitable, or unavoidable, but He chose the word “necessary” instead. The reason may be that temptations are necessary to find out the mettle of which each one of us is made. The student cannot graduate unless he passes the test and the more difficult the test, the more merit the student will receive. A ship or a car cannot be called safe until it is tested. This is sometimes done in true-life situations, or in a simulated condition. We have to be tested. This is part of the package, and this is why God allows it.

The second point that He wanted to make clear is that very often Satan uses man to tempt his fellow man to sin. He wanted to alert us to a possibility we may not be aware of. So we have to watch our behavior especially in front of those who look up to us and consider us their role models. This puts an added responsibility on those who are in leadership positions, and more so on teachers and parents, who often are emulated by the children with whom they associate. The added responsibility here is due to the fact that children are more impressionable than adults, and they are at the stage when they have the least resistance to influences coming from the adults around them especially parents and teachers.

5. “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.” (Lk 9:62)

Jesus said this to a man who asked Him to let him go home and say farewell to those in his home, before following Him. Obviously this man was asked by Jesus to follow Him. Why did Jesus refuse to let him do it? Was it an unreasonable request? Many may fail to see why, and others may feel that Jesus' response was too harsh and unrealistic.

The reason that Jesus acted this way was consistent with what He said and did throughout His ministry. He wants to be first in the hearts of those who follow Him. He does not want to be second. So when this man asked Him to let him go home first to say good bye to his family, he felt that he was not putting Him as his first priority, he is putting his folks before Him. He also saw that the man was not sincere in accepting His invitation, and that he asked to go home, to think about it more, and that he would not come back. This was why he was rejected. By contrast, we find that when Jesus called Levy (Matthew) to follow Him, while he was sitting at the table collecting taxes from people, that he followed Him without hesitation. He left the place where he was sitting with the money that he collected and the safe in which he kept it. St. Matthew put Jesus first, and this was why Jesus accepted him.

As we read Jesus' answer, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God", we wonder what does He mean by that? In the Old Testament there is an example of someone who looked back and met the consequences. This was Lot's wife, who disobeyed the angel's order and looked back on Sodom as it was burning, and was turned immediately into a pillar of salt. Here too, we wonder why? It seems that by looking back, Lot's wife was indicating that she left Sodom against her will, and that she is regretting it, and that she wanted to fill her eyes for the last time with the image of the city which she loved. This is exactly what Jesus was telling that man. Using an analogy again, He was telling that man that as the farmer cannot look back when he is plowing, because if he did the furrow he is plowing will be crooked, so any man pursuing the Kingdom of God, cannot look back, otherwise he will mess up. He should have a total commitment to the goal in front of him, no wavering, no second thoughts, and no looking back.

6. “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power.” (Mk 9:1)

Here Jesus was correcting some misconceptions about the Kingdom of God. Some have thought that He was talking about the end of time, when God will be the supreme ruler over mankind, establish His Kingdom on earth, and replace Satan as the prince of the world. So, He told them that some of them would see the Kingdom of God come to those who believe in Him. He was telling them that when you believe in me, and decide to follow me, you will receive the Holy Spirit, who will change your life. As a result you will feel that you belong to God, and you will live your life as a child of God, enjoying His love, and forgiveness. This way you will be living in the Kingdom of God.

7. “The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is! Or there!’ For behold the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Lk 17:20, 21)

Here Jesus was responding to a question, that the Pharisees asked Him, about when the Kingdom of God will come. In stating that the Kingdom of God is not something that people will see, or watch for, He was correcting a misconception that not only the ordinary people had, but also the learned Pharisees. He was saying to them that it is not a physical phenomenon; it is a spiritual phenomenon that can happen any time after His death and resurrection. This is why He said that it is in their midst. It is inside those who will believe in Him and also why some will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God.

8. “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Lk 18:16, 17)

Jesus said this when He noticed His disciples interfering with parents who wanted to introduce their children to Him. He did not approve,

and asked them to let them come to Him. He not only wanted this because He loved children, but He saw an opportunity to teach His disciples a lesson. After the disciples allowed the children, and Jesus began blessing them, He told them the reason why He wanted the children to come to Him. He said that the Kingdom of God belongs to them.

He was saying that compared with adults, children can easily enter the kingdom, while adults have to struggle against the powers of Satan, fail and repent, partake of holy communion, resume their struggle, sin again, and repent again. This scenario is repeated hundreds of times until they leave this world. And then they wait for God's judgment and if it is favorable they are allowed to enter the Kingdom of God. But children can enter any time.

Then Jesus made a very important announcement. He said, "Truly, I say to you whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." He was asking His listeners to go back and become children again. One time He told the Pharisee Nicodemus, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." (Jn 3:3) Jesus was telling Nicodemus that when people are born again, they become like children, they change. What changes did He have in mind? He wants adults to abandon the qualities they acquired as they grew from childhood to adulthood. He wants them to be as humble, obedient, trusting, loving, and forgiving as children. He wants us to relinquish our pride, our arrogance, our rebellion against His commandments, our hatred, our stubbornness and refusal to forgive others. He wants us to trust Him and have faith in what He said. He wants us to look up to Him as a child looks up to his father.

Another time the disciples came to Jesus, and asked Him who among them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. They were not happy with being members of that distinguished kingdom, each of them wanted not just to be great, but be the greatest. Again, He called a child and put him in the midst of them, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Mt 18:1-4) As we reflect on this, we

cannot help wondering about our Lord's disciples. What did they see in His life that made them think about greatness in the Kingdom of God? This alone tells us that, they had no idea about the Kingdom of God. And also that they had not learned from Jesus the most important lesson He wanted them to learn; the lesson of humility, the quality that colored every thing He did

9. “Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house, wife, or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Lk 18:29,30)

Jesus said this after He met with the ruler who asked Him what he should do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus reminded him of the commandments, he said that he kept these from his youth. Then Jesus told him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in Heaven; and come and follow me” (Lk 19:22) The Bible tells us that he was sad, because he was very rich. Then Peter said, “We have left our homes and followed you.” (Lk 19:28)

Jesus was presenting one of the important facts about the Kingdom of God. We have to give up our obsession with the world and the things of the world. We can't have it both ways. In order to be a citizen in the Kingdom of God, you have to renounce your citizenship in the kingdom of the world. Then He says, this sacrifice will not go without a reward. God is telling us that He appreciates our sacrifices on His behalf. Even though our sacrifice does not compare with His sacrifice on our behalf, He will reward us for our sacrifice. He mentioned two ways He will reward us. One is to give us in this age what compensates us for our sacrifice, and in the other, He will give us eternal life. What a bargain!

10. “Through many tribulations, we must enter the Kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)

St. Paul said this in Antioch where the natives, agitated by the Jews who hated Jesus and incited the people against Paul, abused the Christians. As a result he was stoned until they thought that he was dead. He taught the new Christians that suffering on behalf of Jesus is an honor and is the road to the Kingdom of God. St. Paul himself suffered more than the disciples. In his second epistle to the Corinthians, he writes, “Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more, in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prison more frequent, in deaths often. Of the Jews, five times I received forty stripes save one, thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep. In journeying often, in perils of water, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathens, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in peril among false brethren, in weariness and painfulness, in watching often, in hunger and thirst, in fasting often, in cold and nakedness.” (2 Cor 11:23-32)

Jesus Himself, on the eve of His crucifixion, told His disciples, “In the world you will have tribulations, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (Jn 16:33) He repeated that they would suffer because of Him, several times. When we compare this with what politicians say to their constituents to get their vote, we are, to say the least, amazed. When human beings want others to follow them, they make all kinds of promises, which they know they can’t keep. But when God wants people to follow Him, He does not promise them pie in the sky. He does not talk too much about spiritual rewards; peace, happiness, the joy of knowing God, while they are still in this world.

He also does not mention the biggest reward of all, which comes on top of all this; the eternal life that they will inherit, after they leave this world. He skips all that and concentrates on the difficulties, the sacrifices, and the suffering that they will go through as His followers. This is the expected outcome of the change in relations between man and God. In the Old Testament man followed God out of fear, and consequently was not ready to suffer because of that. But after Jesus came to die in our place, and pay the price of our sins, demonstrating

God's love, the relationship became that of a loving father and a son who loves his father because he loved him first. Under these conditions, we can be asked to suffer for that relationship, and this happened on a large scale in the first few centuries of the spread of Christianity.

After twenty centuries, many of Jesus' followers are still suffering. We are told this will increase as the world approaches the end of time. When the disciples asked Jesus about the end of the world, He told them to watch for certain signs. One of these was the persecution of Christians. He said, "They will deliver you up to tribulations, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake." (Mt 24:9) Despite this, Christianity spread fast, and many of the early Christians gladly gave their lives in an unparalleled demonstration of their love for Him who emptied Himself, and came down to earth to save them from the eternal death that they deserved.

CHAPTER THREE

JESUS THE MASTER TEACHER

As we examine the life of our Lord, we find that most of His public time was consumed in two activities, healing and preaching. He was known for never refusing anyone's request for healing and also for never shrinking from an opportunity to preach the word of God, regardless of the consequences that He certainly knew in advance.

In this chapter we will deal with His preaching, in which He was trying to teach, the common people, the Scribes and the Pharisees, or His disciples, something about the Kingdom of God. When people read this, some may object saying that God does not try to do anything, for if He wants to do it, He just says the word, and it is done. Before we answer this, we have to explain what we mean when we say that someone is "trying to teach". We mean that even if that person has the best intentions, and that he uses every means at his disposal to teach whatever he wants to teach, there is no guarantee, no matter how hard he tries, that what he is teaching will be learned.

Learning and teaching are two different things. Ideally speaking, teaching should result in learning, and that every bit of knowledge, skill, or understanding that the teacher tries to teach will be learned. But this seldom happens. Most of the time, only some of what is taught will be learned, and the rest will never be learned. The more that is learned, the more the teacher would be described as effective. Some may think that the worst that can happen is that nothing of that which is taught will be learned.

Even though this is a very bad situation, yet sometimes it can be much worse. In addition, the student may learn things opposite to what the teacher intended. An example of this may be a math teacher who tries hard to teach his students, and who thinks that being critical of their failures, and strongly pointing out their mistakes, will make them

learn faster. While he may feel that he is helping them to learn, he is actually driving some of them to hate math, hate school, and maybe hate the rest of the world, things that he never intended for them to learn.

Going back to Jesus, we said that He was trying to teach people. Some may feel that what we just said applies to ordinary teachers but not to Jesus. But it does apply. This means that what he tried to teach was not always learned, for the simple reason that He had decided a long time earlier when He created man, to give him the freedom to make his own decisions. So if man decided not to learn, no power on earth can make him. In fact man was never a good student, when God was the teacher. Just look at what Adam and Eve did with the only thing that God wanted them to learn. He wanted them to learn to obey, and to do what He told them. He told them not to eat the fruit from one tree of the Garden of Eden. What happened? They refused to obey and while they had possibly hundreds of other trees, the forbidden one was so appealing, that they couldn't resist it.

Then as we read the history of the Jewish people, we find that they resented God who wanted them to learn a few things, such as worshipping Him only and not going after the gods of other nations. Again, what happened? They refused to learn and worshipped every deity that other nations worshipped, in defiance of the explicit orders by God.

This concept will help teachers and preachers avoid the guilt that many of them experience when some of their students fail. No matter how good the teacher is, and how skillful he is in presenting his material, there is no guarantee that all his students will learn all that he intended them to learn. If God failed in getting man to learn the most important lessons of his life, how much more will human teachers and preachers fail to convince people to learn the concepts and behavior that they need to inherit the Kingdom of God?

Then some will ask the question, “If God knew that, why did He bother spend all that time, preaching and teaching?” He probably did

it for two reasons, first in order that those who will learn would get a chance to listen and then learn. Second, that those who will not learn would also have a chance to listen, so when they transgress, they could not claim that they did not know what was required of them.

Good Teaching, and Bad Teaching

Despite what was said above, the teaching act is still very important. This is why Colleges of Education across the country have been established to teach future teachers about good teaching. What prompted this is the observable fact that some teaching methods are more effective than others in getting students to learn more of what they are supposed to learn. Good teaching involves two main factors; a good teacher, and a good method.

The Qualities of a Good Teacher

Observing effective and ineffective teachers has helped researchers in the field of teaching to recognize the qualities of those teachers who have made a difference in the life of their students. Effective teachers are found to be those who love their students, who are patient, who forget their student's mistakes and use them to enhance their chances to learn. They are also sensitive to the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of their students, are good examples, and serve as role models for them. They are knowledgeable of their subject and are sympathetic toward their students. They are also humble and respectable.

When we say that Jesus was the greatest teacher that ever lived, we say it as proven by the evidence. As we examine Jesus in His role as a teacher, we find that He was the greatest teacher the earth has ever seen. If we take those qualities of good teachers and see how Jesus measures on every one, we find that He excels in all of them.

1) A good teacher is a loving teacher:

Observation and experience show us that if a teacher is motivated to become a teacher by anything else other than his love for children and his desire to help them learn, his success will be very limited. We know that children learn best from those they love, and learn little or learn undesirable things from the teachers they hate. One of the deans of education used to tell those who want to be teachers, that there is a very important pre-requisite for becoming a good teacher, and that is loving children. He used to caution them that the job of a teacher is full of frustration, and nothing could compensate for that and make him stay in his job more than his love for children.

Then he used to end his presentation by telling them, “so, if you don't love children, don't get into teacher education. It is better for everyone if this happens now, before you enroll in the program, because when students enroll in these programs without any consideration of their attitude toward children, they fail. Their failure not only means that they become miserable, but they make their students miserable as well. There are many of these failures in our classrooms today, yet very few quit teaching, because of the investment that they made in terms of time and money for their training.”

Jesus was a loving teacher. He not only loved those who were willing to learn, but also those who were not willing. He loved those who listened to his teaching in order to catch something that they could report to their masters the Scribes and the Pharisees. He loved those who came because they ate of the bread, or wanted to see a miracle, or loved His stories and parables. He loved them all, but when He saw them misbehave, He told them that what they did was wrong.

2) A good teacher is a patient and sympathetic teacher:

Learning is a difficult and a slow process. Adults often forget this, because it has been a long time since they went through the agonies and the failures of learning. Some students have more difficulty

learning certain subjects than others. The student who has no difficulty learning anything is a rare student. So every teacher will witness failure no matter how intelligent his students are. This requires a good measure of patience. Showing impatience or punishing the child for his failure to learn has proved to be detrimental to the learning process.

A sympathetic teacher understands the limitations of his children, and when they fail he sympathizes. He does not forget his struggles and the failures he encountered when he was in the same situation.

Jesus was a very patient teacher. He had a difficult task because before He could teach the Israelites anything about the Kingdom of God, He first had to help them change their orientation from earthly to Heavenly, from carnal to spiritual. The Israelites were extremely worldly people, who were very obsessed with their physical existence to the exclusion of every thing else. So Jesus had to spend a lot of time and energy to get them to look up and to stop looking down. This was a formidable task and needed a lot of patience. This is why He spoke about it, time and time again, but the people did not understand. So when He told the Samaritan woman that, “Every one who drinks of this water shall thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst” (Jn 4:14), she failed to understand that He was talking about spiritual water. She asked Him to give her that water so she may not thirst, nor come to draw. Even the learned Pharisees did not understand Him.

We may think that this was due to their hatred for Him, and their unwillingness to learn from Him. But one of them, Nicodemus, who did not hate Jesus, and who had a desire to learn, when Jesus told him, “Truly, Truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” (Jn 3:3) What did Nicodemus say? Did he understand? He did not, and this is why he answered, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” (Jn 3:4) The Bible tells us many times that most of the people did not understand when he spoke and as a result, they did not believe Him. Sometimes they went farther than

that, as when they asked Him to leave their village (Mt 8:34), or when they wanted to crown Him King over his objections (Jn 6:15), or when they cried, “Crucify Him, crucify Him.” (Jn 19:6)

In all this He never lost His temper, punished, or even scolded anyone for failing to understand Him. The closest He came to that was when somebody approached Him asking why His disciples failed to cast an evil spirit from his son. Jesus said to him, “Till when shall I endure you?”(Mt 18:17) The man did not answer, neither did Jesus, but He did cast out the evil spirit, and may have answered His own question murmuring to Himself, “I shall endure you and your fellow men for ever, yes, for ever.”

Even His students did not understand Him. There are many instances that demonstrate this. But nothing is a stronger example than what happened when Jesus told them after Lazarus died, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead...let us go to him.” Thomas, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (Jn 11:11-16) We do not know why the disciples failed to understand Him, when He said to them that He would go to awaken him. Did they take Jesus' words literally? And if they did, couldn't they ask themselves, why does Jesus want to go to awaken him this time? This was not the first time that Lazarus slept, and Jesus was not there every time to awake him. Unless there was something different about his sleep this time, they should have concluded that He does not mean that he was asleep, but dead. And even after He told them that he is dead, what on earth came over Thomas to tell his fellow disciples that they should go and die with him? Despite this, He never lost His patience and never scolded or punished them for failing to understand Him.

Patience is one of God's qualities from the very beginning. What mankind did is nothing short of open rebellion against its creator, but He endured them and forgave them, and when their rebellion reached

its peak, and He punished them, He came to their rescue when they cried to Him.

Another example of His patience and sympathy happens to every one of us when we sin. Every time we repent of our sins, and partake of the Holy Communion, we are forgiven. What happens after that? We sin again and most of the time we commit the same sins that we repented of before. This happens over and over again. What does God do every time? Does He get mad? No, again and again He wipes the slate clean, forgives us, and asks us to try again.

3) A Good Teacher is a Forgiving Teacher:

Many teachers insist on high standards for their students, especially if they know that they are capable of better work than what they do. Yet how many times do children translate their teachers' exhortation and insistence on quality work as meanness?

How many times do students rebel against their teacher because he is an authority figure? This rebellion takes the shape of resentment, and defiance. This can be expressed anywhere from a nasty look, to a physical assault. This happens quite often now in our schools, to the extent that many public schools have installed metal detectors to prevent students from bringing weapons to school. If this has become so common these days, to not deserve to be mentioned as news, it was really an event if a student assailed a teacher forty or fifty years ago.

I still remember an incident that happened in 1941. I was active in the Sunday School movement at that time. One day, as I was coming out of my class, I saw a dear friend of mine coming out of his class. Instead of waiting for me as usual, he sped up as if to avoid walking with me. So, I caught up with him. As I was about to reach him, I saw him trying to put something in his pocket. When I asked him about it, he told me that it was a pocketknife. I asked him if it was his, he answered no, and added that it belonged to one of his students. After several questions about why did he take it from him, and what was he doing with it, which he evaded, he finally told me that the student

attacked him with the knife. I was shocked to hear that, and when I told him that he should report it, he just smiled and said, why do you want me to forfeit my blessing? I have been blessed today, because I was worthy to be attacked as I was serving God. So, he not only refused to report the incidence to the police, but he also forgave the child who attacked him.

Jesus was a very forgiving teacher. The Bible tells us that He was made uncomfortable in a few places; including Nazareth, the town in which He spent the major part of his life, and consequently He had to leave. Just imagine for a moment that the King of the Universe was insulted or asked to leave some place on the earth that He founded with His power. The powerful Scribes and Pharisees, who called Him an imposter, a breaker of the Sabbath, a friend of the prince of demons, hated him. He was ridiculed, treated with contempt, betrayed by one of His closest friends, denied by another, spat on, flogged, and finally tried in a kangaroo court, and condemned to die on a cross.

While all this was happening He continued to teach and He continued to forgive. After His resurrection, He met Mary Magdalene, and told her to go and tell His “brethren” that He will be ascending to His Father and their Father. (Jn 20:17) He called the disciples who abandoned Him, including Peter who denied Him, and Thomas who would doubt His resurrection “His brothers”. He forgave even the soldiers and their captain, who crucified Him, when He spoke His first words on the cross, calling on His Father, “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Lk 23:34)

4) A Good Teacher is a Sensitive Teacher:

A sensitive teacher is aware that his students are different in many ways, and applies this knowledge in treating them. He knows that what works with one student will not necessarily work with another. He individualizes instruction according to the different capabilities and learning styles of his students. In helping them behave, he is sensitive to their personalities and gives each of them the treatment most likely to produce the appropriate response. He is also sensitive

to their reaction to everything he does, and every word he says, trying always to build them up and avoid hurting them in any way.

Jesus was a very sensitive teacher. We find Him treating everyone according to their personality, paying particular attention to their motives and intentions. Sometimes He called people to follow Him without any conditions, as He did with the twelve. But when He called the rich man to follow Him, He asked him first to sell all he had, give it to the poor, and then come and follow Him. The disciples must have wondered that He had never asked anyone to do that before. So why did He ask this particular man to do that as a prerequisite for following Him? His behavior was an indication of His sensitivity to people. He knew that this rich man was so obsessed with his possessions that he could not give them up. And since Jesus wants to be first in people's hearts, it was easy to see that with this man's love for money; he would be unable to put Jesus on top of his priorities until he gets rid of those possessions.

We also find Him turning down some who wanted to follow Him. When one of them asked Him if he could follow Him, He looked at him, and knew that his motivation was based on a false interpretation of the Kingdom of God. He thought that since it was a Kingdom, there must be material benefits to be gained by those who join it, and so he decided to follow the man who spoke often about it. Jesus answered him, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head." (Mt 8:20) He was really telling him "if you want to follow me for earthly gain, whether it is possessions, fame, or power, I am sorry I have none of these to offer you. Those who follow me should not follow me for any physical gain, but for a spiritual gain."

We also find Him healing people using different methods. For the man born blind, He mixes His spittle with clay, and put the mixture on the place where the eyes were supposed to be, and then ask him to go and wash in a pond. In other cases, he touched the blind person, and in another he just spoke to him, without any contact with him. We also find Him inviting Himself to eat at somebody's house, which He

did with Zachias, while accepting another person's invitation, which He did with Simon the Pharisee. Sensitive teachers are those who know their students better than others. Jesus knew every human being He met, not only better than any other human being, but He knew people more than they knew themselves. So, He was the most sensitive teacher that ever lived.

5) A Good Teacher is a Good Role Model:

One of the most important qualities of a good teacher is that he practices what he preaches. Many people can talk about anything including virtue, but do not practice it. An effective speaker is a speaker who is enthusiastic about what he talks about and who believes in what he says. It is known that talk is cheap, and behavior speaks louder than words. There is no doubt about which is more convincing. This is obvious in the case of parents, who ask their children to refrain from a certain behavior, while they themselves refuse to abide by it. Needless to say, their children are justified if they fail to comply. So if you want your children to be honest, you have to be honest yourself. If you want them to be truthful, you have to be truthful yourself, and stop stretching the truth to suit your purposes. In short, you have to become a role model for your children. Doing what you are telling others to do is the best way to convince them that what you recommend is not theoretical, but practical, and can be done.

Jesus knew the importance of this principle and its effect on people. One day He told them, “The Scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger.” (Mt 23:2-4) He never asked anyone to do anything that He Himself did not do. He was the one perfect role model the human race has ever seen. Sometimes He drew people's attention to this. One day, after His disciples were arguing among themselves about who is the greatest, He told them, “Learn from me for I am meek, and lowly of heart.”(Mt 11:29) Another time

He asked the people to be perfect as their Father in Heaven who is perfect. Many may have thought that it was easy to talk about perfection, something that does not exist, and almost impossible to reach. Jesus did not hesitate to stand before a big crowd and state unequivocally his perfection by challenging them saying, “Who among you can convict me of a sin?” (Jn 8:46)

6) A Good Teacher is a knowledgeable Teacher:

This is the one recognized quality of a good teacher that no one argues about. The interesting fact about knowledge, and its role in making the teacher more effective, is that no one denies its importance and its absolute necessity, yet its presence does not automatically make a teacher good. The simple reason is that teaching entails much more than knowledge of the subject matter. It entails presenting that subject matter in a way, which is interesting and understandable to students. This means that someone who is a master of a certain field of knowledge could be the worst teacher of that which he so completely mastered, because he does not know how to teach it.

I remember when I was an undergraduate in the School of Science at Cairo University, I signed up for a geology course in my sophomore year. This was the second course of geology (Geo 201). There were eighteen of us who signed up for the course. The first lecture was a disaster. When it was over, Dr. Andrew our professor left, but none of the 18 moved. We were all stunned; nobody understood much of what the professor said. As we spoke about this, we did not want to think that our knowledgeable professor was that bad a teacher. So we thought that he might have used some of the concepts and knowledge which we were supposed to know from the introductory course (Geo 101). So we decided to brush up on our first course before the next lecture.

We did that and came to the second lecture full of hope and anticipation. But, we were severely disappointed. What happened in the first lecture was repeated in the second. Again, after the lecture,

Dr. Andrew left and we did not. This time we decided to see the dean, to tell him what happened. I remember that when we told him about our problem, he was shocked and said, “Dr. Andrew is one of the most outstanding geologists in the world”. I remember one of us shot back saying, “We are not denying that. This is not the issue. The issue is that he is a lousy teacher”. The dean trying to end up the meeting said, “I cannot do anything about this”. One of us answered, “You may not, but we can.” After this, the eighteen of us went to the Registrar's office and dropped the course.

Jesus was the most knowledgeable teacher who ever lived. He not only knew all that there is to know about the subjects He taught, but He was knowledgeable in every field of knowledge. Nothing was hidden from Him. When He was only twelve, He remained in the Temple discussing with the learned Scribes and the Pharisees some of the concepts of religion. His knowledge at that early age was so obvious that “All that heard Him were amazed at His understanding and answers.” (Lk 2:47)

His knowledge was revealed in several incidents. More than once, when his enemies thought bad thoughts about Him, He knew it, and asked them why they thought that way. This happened when they thought that He casts out evil spirits by the help of Beelzebul. He told them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste.” (Mt 12:25) Another occasion was when He said to the paralytic whose friends carried him to where Jesus was, “My son your sins are forgiven.” (Mt 9: 2) The Bible tells us that some of the Scribes said to themselves, “this man is blaspheming.” But Jesus knowing their thoughts said to them, “Why do you think evil in your hearts?” (Mt 9:4) Then there is the meeting with the Samaritan woman, in which He told her that the man she was living with was not her husband. The woman was dumfounded when she heard this. She left her jar on the well and ran to her village to tell the people about Him.

The Bible tells us that as He grew, He “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.” (Lk 2:52) After He began His ministry, He continued to impress people with His knowledge,

including His neighbors. The first time He spoke in public was in Nazareth His hometown before He moved to Capernaum. When the people heard Him, they spoke well of Him and wondered at the gracious words, which proceeded out of His mouth; and they said, “Isn't this Joseph's son?” (Lk 4:22) And when He finished the Sermon on the Mount, “The crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority.” (Mt 7:28)

7) A Good Teacher is a Respectable Teacher:

A good teacher cannot be a contemptuous person. He has to be worthy of his student's respect, for the simple reason that students will not learn much from a person whom they do not respect. This is something that beginners in the teaching profession often worry about. One of the facts that they soon discover is that respect must be earned. In other words, students will not respect you because you are the teacher, which means that it does not come automatically with the title of “teacher.” It comes after the teacher demonstrates that he is worthy of respect. People respect those who have qualities that they admire.

Those who have great knowledge, great accomplishments, or have rare skills in one of the fields of human endeavor, are usually respected. Another dilemma facing new teachers is the relationship between respect and love. They are told that a teacher has also to be loved by his students. In their mind these two characteristics are not reconcilable. You either get respect or love, but you cannot get both. They build this idea on the general understanding that the behavior of the teacher that leads to respect is not only different from that which leads to love, but is almost the opposite. This is a misconception, which is widely spread among teachers. In fact any teacher who knows how to conduct himself in dealing with students can earn them both.

I was personally helped in this area by a movie that I saw while wrestling with this dilemma. The film was called, “Good bye Mr. Chips”. I don't recall the names of the stars in it, but I remember very

vividly some of its content. Mr. Chips was a teacher who was hired to teach a class of problem teenagers. In the beginning, they neither loved nor respected him. But gradually he earned their love and respect. So this group of rowdy and unruly teenagers who were famous for their mischief and the inability of any teacher to control them were changed in a matter of a few months to a delightful bunch of young men eager to learn and excel. How did Mr. Chips manage to do that? He did it by a combination of behavior that reflected the two qualities that he wanted to be bestowed on him by his students; love and respect. He loved his students and respected them.

The amazing thing is that these two qualities when directed toward a human being no matter how bad he is will eventually be returned to their originator. So, if you love someone, and persist in loving him, even if he shows you nothing but hatred and hostility, he will come around and return your love. The same thing happens with respect. If you respect someone and persist in respecting him, in time you will earn his respect. So Mr. Chips treated those teenagers with love and respect. He never scolded them or yelled at them. When someone misbehaved, he spoke with him alone with tenderness and concern, showing his love and dealing with the problem from the perspective of the student's welfare and not from that of his own pride. He was patient in dealing with them and tolerated their rebellion in the beginning. But he insisted on certain standards of behavior, and stuck to his guns on that. He pointed out their mistakes, tried to reason with them, and gradually introduced the idea that if reasoning fails to convince someone to change his behavior, then the appropriate punishment will be administered. He never wavered in what he told his students about what he expected of them, and the consequences of not meeting those expectations.

The scene that stuck in my mind was that of Mr. Chips knowing about one of his students doing something wrong and speaking with him about it several times. He decided that punishment should be applied. So, he took the offending student in his lap, face down and began to hit him with something that he held in his hand, but as he was hitting him, he was crying. Nevertheless he went with the

punishment until he felt that it was time to stop. I also noticed that he never showed any signs of hatred or any other emotion beside love, while punishment was administered. Many parents and teachers often display frustration or disgust or a similar emotion while they are punishing a child for an offense. When this happens it becomes very hard for the child to believe that what is happening is the result of love and concern.

Jesus was a very respectable person. He respected Himself and respected others. He was known to hate sin, but he loved and respected sinners. His respect of others was demonstrated by His humility. The arrogant person feels that he is better than those around him. He feels that he is superior to them in one or more quality. He compares his achievements with theirs and consequently feels no respect for any of them. But a humble person does not feel that way. He feels the worth of every individual no matter how humble his accomplishments, or how poor and uneducated he may be. When this is coupled with love, the result is a genuine and long lasting respect. Some may think that humility and respect cannot coexist. This is not true. People, who should be respected because of their great knowledge or their great accomplishments, get the respect that they deserve especially when they are humble and unpretentious. Jesus was respected because of His great attributes, His humility, and His respect for others.

8) A Good Teacher of Religion is a Spiritual person:

When we consider Jesus as a teacher, we have to think about Him as a teacher of religion. For any teacher of religion the qualities mentioned above are not enough. There is an additional quality needed to be an effective teacher. He needs to be a spiritual person. There are many teachers of religion who are knowledgeable about what happened in the past between God and man, who know the Bible from cover to cover. But they are not effective teachers, because they do not know God, they only know something ABOUT Him. A successful teacher of religion needs to have a personal relationship with God, so when he teaches, he speaks from experience.

Others talk about God second-hand; they repeat what others have written. A spiritual teacher is somebody who has walked with God and who has had many personal dealings with Him. This will give him the insight to guide his students in their attempt to commit their life to God. If he does not have such a relationship with God, the best that he can hope for is that his students will know the facts of religion but fail to apply them in their lives.

Needless to say, Jesus meets this requirement more than any other teacher of religion that ever lived. He was a spiritual person. And even though “the Word became flesh”, He was still God. Some may think that his becoming a man affected His spirituality. This couldn't be farther from the truth. If many mortal men and women have been able to attain high levels of spirituality and became pilgrims, how much higher can the incarnate Son of God attain in spirituality.

The Effective Teaching Methods

A good teacher as described above is very essential for good learning to happen; yet without using the appropriate methods of teaching his effect will be limited. The ideal situation, which will maximize learning, is a good teacher using the good methods and techniques, which have been tested and recommended, by master teachers. These methods are based on our goals, the knowledge of how learning takes place, and the psychology of the learner.

Previously schools were supposed to help the young to know as much information as possible about the world. The method used to learn the facts, thought to be important, was by rote memorization. This gave two results; the first was that speaking and reading became the favorite method of instruction. The second was that most of this knowledge was never used by the student except to regurgitate it on a test paper. It was then mostly forgotten after some time. When people began to think about this, they realized that it was a waste they could not afford. They saw millions of dollars spent on education with no concrete results to show for it. What this type of education produced

was people with no useful traits, or outstanding characteristics, but with a smattering of isolated facts that were good for nothing, who yet felt that they were “educated” and consequently superior to others who were not.

If we want our young people to learn and go beyond the goal of being a storage place for inert and useless information, we have to change those outmoded methods. We need to adopt methods, which allow them not only to learn the relevant facts, but also to use them to improve their lives, and help them develop their rational powers and problem solving skills.

These methods include motivation, simplifying the complex, focusing on the important, neglecting the trivial, considering the capabilities of the learner, avoiding telling as much as possible, asking good questions which require thinking, and using a hands on approach which maximizes learning through experience.

In the remainder of this chapter we are going to see how many of these new methods Jesus used to teach the multitudes some of the concepts of the Kingdom of God.

Motivation

Motivation is the most important condition that must exist in order for good learning to take place. Let’s clarify what it is. Motivation is getting students excited about what they are learning. This means getting them to the point where they want to learn, not to get good grades, not to please their teacher, not to avoid their parent’s anger and punishment, but because they see its relevance and importance for THEM. That is motivation. This is predicated on the fact that human behavior is purposeful. In other words, no normal human being will do anything without purpose.

There is always a goal for every move that we make. The goal may be trivial, or inappropriate, but it is always there. If we examine what happens in most of our schools, we will find that children are learning

for purposes mentioned above, to please someone or avoid the wrath and punishment of another. These are poor motives for learning, but they do get children to learn a few things. But what is learned in this case stays at a very low level of usability. It merely gets stored until the test, and when it is used for that purpose, most of it is forgotten. It is never used for anything else. And as the saying goes, if you don't use it, you lose it.

Jesus knew this, and provided mankind with the strongest possible motivation to follow Him. First, He told them that He loves them, and this provided a new motivation other than the fear that ruled the relationship between man and God previously. This was a big change in people's feeling about God. And instead of looking on Him as a cruel master who commanded obedience, they began to look on Him as a Father who loves them, and who is willing to forgive and forget their sins, when man admits them.

Second, He promised them a life full of peace, regardless of any problems they may meet. He also told them that He would help them with any problem or burden that they felt heavy for them to carry. As to their temptations, He promised that He would help, and all that man has to do is call on the Holy Spirit for help. He also reminded them that the final motivation is an eternity in Heaven with Him and the entire Heavenly host. All this should have produced a genuine desire to listen and learn, because man under these conditions could see that his welfare is tied with following what Jesus recommended.

Was this motivation successful? Some people found it convincing while others did not. Those who learned under it were fewer than those who were not motivated by it. The reason is that it is not only God who talks to man, but Satan does too. And Satan has a definite advantage over God in this respect. He knows that our nature is corrupted by sin, and our goals in life have become worldly and physical. He capitalizes on this to lure us to follow him rather than God. When we hear God's message, he tells us not to believe it and gives very good reasons why we shouldn't. He reminds us of the evil that God is responsible for. He points to disease, poverty, famine,

crime, drugs and the rest of the problems that we suffer from, and says that it is God who uses them to punish us for our sins. Unfortunately many people believe him, and refuse to believe God.

Simplifying the Complex

One of the difficult tasks that teachers face is how to simplify complex concepts so that those who do not have the sophisticated information needed to understand them will be able at least to have some understanding of them. To do that, the teacher has to have a complete and thorough understanding of the complex concept. He then has to have the ability to put himself in the place of the student and try to see things from where he stands. After this he has to try various approaches to simplify the complex, and judge each from the point of view of the student.

If the teacher cannot do this, his attempts to teach this concept will be doomed. From my experience observing hundreds of classroom teachers in action, I can say that those who do this job well are very few.

Jesus faced this problem, during his ministry. The source of His difficulty was not only the complexity of what He wanted to teach, but also the total inability of the people to receive that particular type of information. What Jesus tried to teach was in the realm of spirit, while His audiences were totally immersed in the realm of the flesh. To overcome this difficulty, Jesus spoke many times about the difference between the two. He also provided them with a living example of what He meant. He lived a life almost devoid of any material concerns. He was a poor carpenter, who did not own anything in this world, and who never pursued any of the worldly possessions that others pursued. Did this approach succeed in convincing the people of the folly of their carnal living? The answer is, it did convince a few to abandon their physically oriented life, and to adopt a spiritually oriented life.

When Jesus began to teach the people facts about the Kingdom of Heaven, He found that He had to simplify them. He used parables to accomplish this. When He wanted to tell them about God's love for them, He told them that the Father loves them as earthly fathers love their children. He even told them that He is THEIR father, and that they can even address Him as "Father". To teach them about repentance and the Father's forgiveness, He told them the story of the prodigal son. To teach them the importance of their eternity, He used the story of the man who found the hidden treasure, and the woman who searched for the lost coin.

When He wanted to teach them about loving strangers, He told them the story of the Good Samaritan. To teach them about being always ready for the Kingdom of Heaven, He told them the story of the five wise virgins and the five foolish ones who were invited to a wedding. To teach them not to ignore the word of God when they hear it, He told them the story of the sower who went out to sow. To teach them to depend on God for all their needs, He called Himself the Good Shepherd. To teach them the truth about the Father, He said that he who has seen the Son has seen the Father. And when He wanted to teach them the difference between righteousness and evil, He likened them to the difference between light and darkness.

Focusing on the Important

In order to simplify a complex concept, one has to focus on the important and neglect the unimportant. Jesus did this when He tried to explain His relationship with the Father, which is a complicated concept for man, by saying that whoever has seen Him has seen the Father, that He is in the Father, and the Father is in Him. When He wanted to talk about the intercessory role that He plays in saving man, He told them that no one comes to the Father except through Him. When the disciples asked Him about the end of the world and His Second Coming, He told them a few key events that will precede it. But He followed by telling them the most relevant fact, and that is to be ready when the end comes by saying, "WATCH therefore, for you

do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Mt 24:42) He was really telling them don't occupy yourselves with trying to find the time of my Second Coming because you will not be able to know. Only the Father knows it. The time is not important, what is important is that you be ready when it comes.

Considering the Ability of the Learner

A successful teacher is one who considers the ability of his students to learn. With this in mind, he may decide that a particular concept is not yet suitable for this group, so he decides to postpone it until a later date when they are capable of learning it. This consideration can also affect the method that he decides to use to teach that concept. What is important is that instruction be planned on the level of the learner, because if it is too high, no learning will happen, and the teacher's efforts will be wasted. If it is lower than the capabilities of the student, learning it will not require any effort, which makes it boring. When this happens students will not be motivated to learn. The ideal lesson is pitched at a slightly higher level than the capabilities of the group. This way it challenges and motivates them, and makes them use their skills and abilities to the limit.

Jesus was very aware of this. Even though the differences between human beings in understanding spiritual concepts may not be as great as the differences between their understandings of worldly concepts, there were significant differences that warranted adjustments in the method that He used in each case. After He told the people the parable of the sower, His disciples asked Him why He always spoke to the people in parables. He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given.” (Mt 13:11) He may have meant that if He told them spiritual facts without using analogies, they will not understand, but His disciples could. He may also have meant, “The reason I am explaining the parable to you is because you asked, and they did not.”

Asking Good Questions

One phrase which we learned during our teacher training years and have never forgot is, “Telling is not teaching, and listening is not learning.” This means that the traditional method of teaching, in which the teacher lectures the students, is the least desirable method of teaching and that listening, which has been the role that students played in school for a long time, is not effective in producing true learning. Good learning happens when students become active in the learning process. By this we mean that they have to be engaged in something more demanding than just listening. This can be thinking, handling material, discussing, comparing, debating, classifying, drawing conclusions, doing research, reporting, etc. These cannot happen on a productive level unless students are motivated to learn and challenged with inquiries and problems that interest them.

One of the recommended ways to get students to participate is to ask good and provocative questions. Some may ask, are there good questions and bad questions? The answer is yes. When the teacher asks a recall question, such as, “What is the capital of England?” In order to answer, the student simply has to recall what he learned before and give it as he received it. There is no thinking here. This is a bad question, because it does not elicit from students any higher intellectual ability beyond the simple recall of information. On the other hand, a good question brings forth some of the higher functions of the brain mentioned above.

Jesus used this technique in almost every case He was asked about something. He answered the inquiry with a question that He directed to the person asking it. This served two purposes. If the person was asking the question to catch the Lord saying something to be held against Him later, he will be on the defensive. And instead of being the questioner, he finds himself the questioned. But if he is sincere and really wanted to learn, this technique will make him an active participant in his own learning, by thinking about the question himself. Jesus' question usually focused on the crucial aspects of the issue, which the question raised. A few examples from the many

dialogues that took place between Jesus and the people will clarify this.

Example # 1: The Paralytic

This man was paralyzed for thirty-eight years waiting for an angel to stir the water, and who was never able to reach it first because of his condition. When Jesus saw him, He asked him, “Do you want to be healed?” (Jn 5:6) Why did He ask him that, while He knew the answer? He probably did that in order to remind him why he is in this desperate situation. He was trying to focus his attention on his inability to reach the water in time to be healed. The man obviously did this, and answered Jesus saying, “I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is troubled.” (Jn 5:7)

By this the man was confessing to Jesus that all his relatives and friends had abandoned him. This may have triggered in his mind the reasons why they abandoned him. This probably reminded him of his sins and made him realize that his sickness was the result of his sinful behavior. He probably repented of his sins and vowed not to sin again. Jesus strengthened this and made it more clear, when He told him, “See, you are well, sin no more, lest something worse will befall you.” (Jn 5:14)

Example #2: The Lawyer

This lawyer was a scribe. He asked Jesus a question to test Him. The question was a very important question, a serious question, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk 10:25) Knowing his motive, Jesus asked him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (Lk 10:27) Jesus turned the question around and asked the Scribe about what is written in the Law, as if He were telling him, “Since You are a Scribe, you are supposed to know the Law. Consequently, you know the answer, so why are you asking me?” His question also pointed out that the answer is found in the Law. This question may have had a bonus effect, in providing an implicit proof that Jesus respects the Law, contrary to what the Scribes and the

Pharisees accused, that He did not respect the Law, and broke it several times. Suddenly the Scribe found himself in the place of a young student who was asked by the teacher a difficult question. But, he knew the answer and told Jesus, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind. And your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk 10:27) The Lord then said to him, “Do this and you will live.” (Lk 10:28) We don't know the result of this exchange, nor whether this lawyer learned anything from it. Did he follow Jesus' advice and decided to love God and put Him first in his life? The Bible does not tell us.

Example #3: Taxes to Caesar

One day the Pharisees held a meeting for the sole purpose of thinking of ways to trip Jesus and catch Him saying something that could be used against Him. So, they sent some of their disciples to ask Him a very simple question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (Mt 22:17) It is interesting to examine the introduction that they used before they asked the question. They said, “Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the positions of men.” (Mt 22:16) They were, in effect telling Him that He should not have any regard for Caesar, and consequently should encourage them to pay no taxes to him. The question was what we call a tricky question.

They figured that Jesus would lose on that one. If He said that no taxes are to be paid to Caesar, He would be regarded as an enemy to Caesar. If He said that taxes should be paid to him, He will be considered as a traitor to His own people. But Jesus knew their thoughts and the trap that they had cleverly designed for Him. He got out of this sticky situation by His favorite technique. He asked them a question. He asked them to show Him a coin. When they did, He asked them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” (Mt 22:20) When they answered, “Caesar's,” they had already answered their own question. Then He made it clear, when He followed this by

saying, "Render therefore to Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God, the things that are God's." (Mt 22:21)

Example # 4: Simon the Pharisee

St. Luke wrote that a Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to eat with him. He probably wanted to examine Him closely. To make the examination thorough, he invited a number of his friends who were also Pharisees. So when Jesus stepped into his house, He was surrounded by many of His strongest enemies, who were determined to teach the young Rabbi a lesson He would never forget. Jesus was aware of all this, but accepting the invitation gave Him an opportunity to reveal to this group of influential leaders the folly of their religious beliefs.

While the dinner was being served, an uninvited woman, known to be a sinner, entered the house. She stood behind Jesus and cried on His feet, wiped them with her hair, and poured on them a flask of expensive perfume. Simon and his friends decided, without asking Him one question that He could not be from God, because the woman was a sinner. Jesus knew their thoughts, and decided to teach those arrogant Pharisees a lesson. So He started telling them the story of two people who were indebted to someone. The first owed him five hundred dinarii and the other fifty. When he realized that they could not pay him, he forgave them both. So which of these two will love him more? Simon found himself questioned by the man whom he invited for the purpose of questioning him. Jesus by doing this took the initiative away from him. He also forced Simon and the others to think what was Jesus' goal from the question? After Simon answered that the one who owed more, Jesus made them think more when He drew a comparison between the woman and Simon. He pointed out to them that she loved God because she knew that she was a sinner, while Simon and his friends don't have much love for God because they think that they are righteous.

Example # 5: The woman caught in the act of adultery

The Scribes and the Pharisees brought Him a woman caught committing adultery, and asked Him what they should do with her, reminding Him that Moses told them that God said that women like her should be stoned to death. It was obvious that they were challenging Him with a situation whose solution was known according to the Law, and daring Him to offer a different one. What did Jesus do? He bent down and began to make marks in the sand, and when He stood He told them, “Let him who is without a sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” (Jn 8:7) This was more or less a question to every one of them; do you deserve to participate in executing this woman? Are you more righteous than she is? When some of them did not find their sins, Jesus helped them remember by what He wrote in the sand, and while it was not written in any known language, nevertheless every one saw his particular sin written in the sand by the finger of God.

Example #6: Raising Lazarus

When Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that their brother was sick, He did not go to Bethany right away. Even after he had died, He delayed going for four days. When He finally arrived, both Mary and Martha came to meet Him at the burial site. Before He raised him, He asked them, “Where have you laid him?” (Jn 11:34) Why did He ask this question, when He knew the answer? He most likely asked to concentrate the attention of the two sisters and the rest of those who were there, on the place where he was buried. Then when Lazarus was raised, there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that this really happened. Another possible reason was to focus everyone on these questions, “What is He going to do? Will He be able to raise him as He did with others? But this one has been dead for four days and the body is already beginning to deteriorate. Can He do it?” All these questions helped focus all the attention on what Jesus will do. The result was an overwhelming recognition of this great miracle to the extent that the Bible tells us that many have believed in Him as a result of this miracle. (Jn 11:45)

So, Jesus was the best teacher who ever lived. This bestows a rare honor and unparalleled dignity upon the teaching profession, an honor not shared by many other professions. This should provide a strong motivation for many of our young men and women who are thinking of a vocation to consider seriously this vocation, which was honored by God Himself. Teachers should aspire to the perfection, which Jesus demonstrated as a teacher. This is the only way we can upgrade the quality of our teachers and improve the kind of education that takes place in our schools.

Dear Reader:

The purpose of this series of four books about the life of our Lord is not to entertain you by providing you with new insights about His life. The purpose is to introduce the Lord to you in such a way that will make it easier for you to understand Him better, and to form a personal relationship with Him. I pray and hope that you did just that. This is the best thing that you have ever done to yourself. If you did not, it is not too late to consider seriously your relationship with God. There is no doubt it is the most important thing in your life. He died so you can have eternal life. So, please don't throw it away. He is waiting for you. Do it today.

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