PART 2

The Moral and Ethical Teachings of Jesus Christ
Jesus the Teacher (1)

Introduction

We come now to the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus Christ. In many ways this is the easiest part of the course to teach, and that for a number of reasons:

1. The sheer genius of Christ as a teacher. Much of Christ’s teaching on how people ought to behave is given through the medium of parables, as we shall presently see. They are marvels of sophisticated simplicity in their penetrating observation of human nature, its strengths and weaknesses, its foibles and perversities. Their story form appeals to the most elementary student, and yet they deliver their message with unforgettable force even to the most learned. As teachers we shall find them an easy and yet satisfying means of communication.

2. The superficial attractiveness of Christ’s teaching. Take the so-called ‘golden rule’, enunciated by Jesus in his famous ‘Sermon on the Mount’: ‘In everything do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets’ (Matt 7:12). Its utter simplicity coupled with its self-evident rightness gives it an immediate and universal attractiveness. Here is no complicated theory, difficult to understand and open to dispute. Its claim to everybody’s obedience is unambiguous and unanswerable. Its implications are limitless. If it were honestly carried out, our world would become a paradise. But, of course, it is not universally carried out; indeed all of us go against it from time to time. And that brings us to our next point.

3. Why do we all from time to time do wrong? The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, held that no one knowingly does wrong. He meant that when we do wrong, we are not fully aware that what we are doing is wrong. We think, in fact, that it is good. We may well know that what we are doing will harm someone else. But as we do it, we think and feel that it is a good thing to do to harm this other person: it gives us an advantage over him; it satisfies our desire for gain, or power, or revenge. But when we do someone an injustice, Socrates taught, not only do we injure that person, but we also injure ourselves more than we injure him. If only we realised this, said Socrates, we should immediately stop injuring ourselves by wronging other people. But we do not realise it; we are ignorant. Ignorance, then according to Socrates, is the cause of our wrongdoing; and it follows that the way to stop people doing wrong is simply to educate them. Only get them to see that in doing wrong to someone else, they are injuring themselves, and they will immediately stop doing wrong.

But is this true? And if it is, would knowing it be enough to get people to stop doing wrong?
Get your class to discuss such questions as:

(a) Have you ever done anything wrong, knowing at the time that it was wrong?

(b) Do people ever do things that they know will harm themselves (e.g. like smoking, or drug taking)? Why do they do such things?

(c) If you could steal a lot of money, or murder someone, and be absolutely sure that no one on earth would ever find out, is there any reason why you should not do it?

(d) Is it true that when you do someone an injustice, you actually harm yourself? How would you prove it?

(e) The Apostle Paul once said: ‘I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For the good I would do, that I do not; and the evil I don’t want to do, that I keep on doing’ (Rom 7:19). Have any of us ever felt like this?

4. Some basic requirements of any ethical teaching. If, therefore, our teaching of ethics is going to be effective, we shall need to be able to give our students convincing answers to the following (among other) questions:

(a) What is good behaviour? And what is bad? How does one define it?

(b) Has anyone the authority to tell us what is good and what is bad? Why can we not decide it each one for himself?

(c) Why don’t we always do what is right? Why do we often find it hard to do what is right, and easy to do what is wrong?

(d) What adequate motivation can we have for doing what is right, particularly when other people do wrong? Is there any advantage in doing good? Or ought we always to do good even if we suffer for it?

(e) Where can we find the strength to do what we know to be right and to avoid what is bad?

Now if we are going to be fair to the ethical teaching of Jesus Christ, we must allow him to give us, little by little, his answers to these questions. We begin with his own presentation of himself as Teacher and of the nature of his teaching.

Christ’s Presentation of Himself as Teacher

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:25–30)
In this passage Jesus makes two assertions about himself:

1. that he is the almighty Son of God.
2. that nevertheless he is meek and lowly in heart.

He gives two descriptions of his teaching:

1. that it is a yoke to which his disciples must submit, and a burden they must carry.
2. that nevertheless his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

And then on the basis of these two assertions and these two descriptions, he issues two invitations, each accompanied by a promise:

1. come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
2. take my yoke on you and learn from me ... and you will find rest for your souls.

The Two Assertions

Here we find:

1. Christ’s answer to the question: what authority has he to tell us what is right and what is wrong?

   He is the Son of God, to whom God has given supreme power in the creation, government and salvation of the world (‘everything has been committed to me by My Father’). In this he is different from the Buddha who taught his disciples how to gain release from their desires, but never claimed to be God, or even a god, and did not know whether there was a God or not. And different from Mohammed, who claimed to be God’s last and greatest prophet, but not to be God incarnate. We need, therefore, to understand who Jesus claims to be, because on that depends the authority he claims for his ethical teaching.

2. Strong evidence that Christ’s claim is true.

   Professor C. S. Lewis once pointed out that our mental hospitals are full of megalomaniacs claiming to be God, or Napoleon, or Alexander the Great, or a fried egg or something else extraordinary. But Jesus was no arrogant, self-assertive, megalomaniac. His first claim to be the Son of God was balanced by his next claim, ‘I am meek and lowly of heart’, and the Gospels give abundant examples to show that this assertion was true. Alexander the Great did get himself proclaimed as the son of the Egyptian god, Ammon; and he did eventually propose, for political reasons, that both his Greek and his oriental subjects should worship him as a god. But Alexander could never have said ‘I am meek and lowly of heart’. It is the combination of Christ’s claim to deity with his meekness and lowliness of heart that makes his claim both credible and convincing. He has supreme authority: but he is supremely humble. He is God, but He is no tyrant.
The Two Descriptions

1. Christ’s ethical teaching is a yoke
Jesus Christ does not hide the fact that his ethical teaching is a yoke which his disciples must accept, and a burden they must carry.

The meaning of the term ‘yoke’. In the ancient world a yoke was a specially shaped piece of wood which a farmer would fit on to the neck of his oxen so that he could control them and harness them to plough the fields, thresh the corn, or pull the farm carts. Ancient kings, therefore, called their government a ‘yoke’ because by it they controlled and guided the people. And teachers of morality and religion called their teaching a ‘yoke’ for the same reason.

There is a vivid story in the Old Testament (1 Kings 12), which illustrates this meaning of ‘yoke’. The people ask the king to make his yoke easier. Instead he makes it harder; and they revolt. Read the story and tell it to the students in full. See also Acts 15:10, where false religious teaching is described as an unbearable yoke.

Christ’s teaching, then, is a yoke. He is the Son of God, sent by God to be mankind’s rightful king, to govern us and to get us to obey God’s rule. This is the authority he claims for telling us what is right and what is wrong; which is why he began his public teaching by proclaiming ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’ (Matt 4:17). In submitting to his ethics, we are submitting not simply to some abstract moral principles, but to a person to whom we owe personal loyalty.

2. Christ’s ethical teaching is an easy yoke
A good farmer would see to it that the yokes which he put on his oxen fitted them well and did not chafe them. It thus made it easier for the oxen to do their work. If a boy wants to become a champion tennis player, he must submit to his coach. Obeying the coach’s instructions may seem hard at first; but it is better than hitting the ball uncontrollably and in the end it will make the playing easier, more successful and more enjoyable. It is always better to drive a car according to the maker’s instructions. Christ knows how our bodies, minds, emotions and desires were meant to work. He made them! His yoke is designed to fit us, and so to make life easier.

The Two Invitations

1. The first invitation and promise
The first invitation is addressed to people who are weary and burdened. Discuss with your students the ways in which even young people can be weary and burdened. In many big cities of the world the number of young people who commit suicide is going up. Why? Here are some suggestions:

(a) The seeming pointlessness of life.

(b) The difficulty of finding employment, and the consequent feeling of being useless and unwanted.

(c) The boredom, ill health and worry that arise from alcoholism, drugs, frantic lifestyles.
(d) The psychological wounds and guilt feelings that follow immorality.

(e) The basic insecurity caused by strife in the home, parental divorce, one-parent families.

(f) Constant failure to live up to one’s ideals, leading to disgust with oneself.

To those who come to him Christ gives immediate rest, because he gives:

(a) immediate forgiveness and release from guilt: see e.g. Luke 5:20.

(b) a restored sense of purpose in life: see e.g. 1 Thess 1:9–10, ‘to serve the living God’.

(c) an immediate sense of being loved and valued by God, and therefore of being of infinite and permanent significance: see e.g. Matt 12:12; Rom 5:5–11.

(d) an assurance of God’s care in the practical affairs of life and relief from anxiety: see e.g. Matt 6:25–30.

2. The second invitation and promise

This is to enter the School of Christ and to be taught and trained by him how to live. His teaching will require standards of behaviour that are very different from the world’s standards; and for that reason they may well incur the world’s hostility and opposition. But here too Christ promises ‘rest to our souls’, because he can effect within us a ‘new birth’ by which we become children of God, and receive new powers with which to carry out his instructions and to live according to his moral standards: see e.g. 1 John 5:3–4.
Jesus was once asked what in his estimation was the greatest commandment—the basic principle from which all the others are derived? He replied: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the great and first commandment’ (Matt 22:37–38).

We see at once what, according to Christ, the basic motivation behind all true morality must be: love. Not desire for happiness or success, but love. And not love of oneself, nor primarily love for one’s neighbour and the community (though, as a later study will show, that comes second), but love for God, the Creator. The world is his world. He made it to serve his pleasure and to run according to his design. It is only rational that our prime duty should be to live according to our Creator’s will, and, out of sheer gratitude for our existence, to love him. In this context love for God does not mean some sentimental religious feeling: ‘this is the love of God’, says the Bible (1 John 5:3), ‘that we keep his commandments.’ We are to do so with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

Mankind’s greatest wrong

But here also is Christ’s diagnosis of the fundamental trouble both with individuals and with society as a whole. How shall we live as we ought, if we do not love our Maker and live according to his design? How shall we rightly value and treat our fellow men and women, if we deny, or even despise or forget, their Maker? And how would life be anything other than a drudgery, if we served God out of a sullen sense of mere duty, and not out of wholehearted love for him?

In breaking the first and greatest commandment (and we have all done so), we are guilty of the greatest sin—failing to love God. Here we face a fundamental problem. We cannot make ourselves love God. What then can create this love of God within us? The following parable will help us understand.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his
journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to [his] father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is, found. (Luke 15:11–32)

Suggestion: get the class to dramatise the parable.

This is perhaps the most famous of Christ’s parables—a classic of world literature. Dr Kenneth Bailey, who lived for some years among the Palestinians and Bedouin, points out that they have preserved many of the same values as their ancestors who lived in the time of Christ. Their reactions when Dr Bailey told them the parable help us to capture its true meaning.

1. The prodigal son’s outrageous behaviour

(a) His treatment of his father. The prodigal’s chief offence was not that ‘he squandered his wealth in wild living’ (15:13) or that ‘he squandered his father’s property on prostitutes’ (15:20). That was bad enough; but far worse was what he did to his father. In ancient Palestine a father would normally make a will specifying how much each son was to receive on his death. For a son to demand his inheritance before his father died would in that society be regarded as an outrage. It was as if the son was saying: ‘Father, I wish you were dead! You are stopping me enjoying myself. Hurry up and die and get out of my way. Or else rob yourself and give me my inheritance now.’ In a

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society where family relationships were sacred, such an attitude would be unthinkable; and be felt to be unforgivable.

The application of the parable is obvious. Many people have the same attitude to God as the prodigal to his father. Even if they do not deny the existence of the Creator, they want nothing to do with him. The thought of a Creator and of his laws hampers their enjoyment and restricts their freedom. They wish to live in complete independence of God. They certainly do not love him with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. However they want to go on enjoying all the good things that the Creator has made.

(b) The prodigal’s sell-out of the community’s capital. Since in pre-industrialised societies, land and cattle were the extended family’s basic capital, every effort was normally made to keep the land within the extended family. But the son not only demanded possession of his share of the land before his father died, but on receiving it, sold it and squandered the money in the far country. The point is that when he sold it, no other member of the extended family would have dared to buy it, for that would have been to gain possession of land that belonged to the prodigal’s father while he was still living. The prodigal, then, must have sold the land to outsiders and have thus permanently diminished the family’s capital. The village would have been outraged, not only when the prodigal went away, but also when he came back, and they discovered that he had wasted every penny of the capital in wild living. The loss was irrecoverable.

The application is again obvious. When an individual rejects or ignores God, and lives simply to gratify himself, he not only damages himself; he diminishes the whole community’s moral and spiritual capital. He could also injure the community economically by his alcoholism, absenteeism, laziness, fraud and corruption. And how much more so if a whole nation does similarly?

2. The father’s reaction to the son’s demand

When Christ described how the prodigal son devastated his father by making his outrageous request, his hearers would have expected Christ to say that the father flew into a rage and disinherited his son if not executed him. Such a reaction would have been regarded as totally justified. Instead Christ depicted the father as granting his son’s request and letting him depart. Once more the implication is clear. God is no tyrant. He has given men free will and he respects it. When people reject, ignore, despise, insult and deny God, he does not immediately strike them dead, or even withdraw from them life’s good things at once. However, he lets them gradually discover the spiritual poverty and moral misery that inevitably ensue when a creature rejects or ignores the Creator.

3. The prodigal’s dawning repentance

At first getting rid of his father’s presence and control seemed to the prodigal to have paid off. He had a riotously enjoyable time; or so he thought. But eventually reality caught up with him. He came to poverty, hunger, degradation and loneliness. No one wanted him. This began the process of repentance within him. He decided to go home
to his father, and confess his folly. He also planned to put a proposition to his father: ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired servants’ (15:19).

To us, his proposal might seem to indicate genuine repentance, and true reconciliation with his father. But in fact it was not a happy suggestion. On an ancient farm there would be three classes of workers. First there would be the sons of the owner. They would not work for a wage. Being members of the family who would inherit the farm when the father died, they would work for love of the father and of the family and for the good of the family’s estate.

Then there would be the serfs, who worked for their keep, and for a minimal wage, but had no independence. They would live on the farm. But there would also be independent workers, who lived in the village and hired themselves out on contract. The prodigal, on his return, wanted to be one of these. He was not going to live and work simply out of love for his father and family. Having foolishly lost all his own share of the estate through his wild lifestyle, he was now proposing to remain independent of his father and to hire out his services to him for money!

Such a proposal could never satisfy the father. It would not heal the estrangement. The prodigal must abandon his foolish independence. He must accept the father as father, and live and work for him out of love for him and the family.

Many people still make the same mistake. They have learned by bitter experience the moral and spiritual poverty that results from living without God; and they vow to change their lifestyle and to serve God. But like the ancient Pharisees their attitude to God remains wrong. Without, perhaps, thinking, they still assume independence of God; and propose now by good behaviour, works and religious observances to earn God’s favour, hoping that in the end he will pay them by giving them salvation. But this is false. As creatures of God we can never be independent of him. All that we have that is worth having comes from him and belongs to him. We cannot use what is his to buy anything from him—least of all salvation. The only satisfactory way to live for God, is to love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to serve him freely out of love.

But what can generate such love for God in our hearts?

4. The father’s self-humbling

In normal life, if and when a son, like the one in the parable, came back, all the people of the village would be out to meet him, deriding his rags and filth, pouring their curses on his head for all the damage and shame he had done to the community, and getting ready to stone him, if his father ordered it. But at this point the father did an astounding thing: he ran to meet the prodigal, forgave him, and welcomed him back!

Now in the ancient world, no important man would run for any reason. Running was held to be beneath their dignity. Even the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, thought that. For the prodigal’s father to run at all was to humiliate himself. For him to run to meet his prodigal son, instead of waiting in the house in great dignity and aloofness until the prodigal came to the door and was himself humiliated by being kept waiting—this was astounding behaviour. But it showed the prodigal what his father’s...
heart was really like in a way that he had never realised before. His forgiveness, acceptance and re-instatement of the prodigal in the family as a son, provoked him to love the father with all his heart, and to serve him freely thereafter.

Of course, this part of the parable was meant to point to what God has done for us sinners in Christ. In the ancient world crucifixion was considered the most shameful and humiliating death possible, which is why the Christian message of the cross seemed to the philosophical Greeks crude and foolish, and to the religious Jews a scandal. But for millions it has proved the power of God to salvation. For not only has it made forgiveness and reconciliation with God possible; but the self-humbling of God in allowing his creatures to crucify his Son, in order that by that very suffering he might procure their forgiveness and bestow his love on them, has created in the hearts of those who repent and are forgiven, that responsive love for God which is the only satisfactory motive for serving God, the only adequate motive for sound Christian ethics.

The Christian apostle John summed it up in two short sentences. ‘We love God, because he first loved us. . . . This is the love of God that we keep his commandments’ (1 John 4:19; 5:3).

Suggestions for discussion:

1. Discuss: ‘the basis of all true morality is love for God expressed in keeping his commandments’.

2. Discuss the prodigal’s attitude to his father. Where do we see this reflected today in people’s attitudes to God?

3. How does the parable help us to understand how love for God can be generated in our hearts and lives?
Jesus the Teacher (3)

The Second Greatest Commandment

According to Jesus Christ the second greatest of all the commandments is: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ (Matt 22:37–40). This was not a commandment which he there and then invented: he quoted it from the Old Testament (Lev 19:18). Its reasonableness is self-evident. If we all carried it out all the time, the world would soon become a paradise. But we don’t always do so. Why not?

Here get your students to suggest reasons why people do not always love their neighbours as themselves.

One of Jesus’ listeners was an expert in the Old Testament, but did not always obey this commandment any more than other people do. So he tried to excuse himself by suggesting that there was a difficulty with its wording which made it virtually impossible to carry it out. ‘But who is my neighbour?’ he said. What he meant was this: does the term ‘neighbour’ mean simply those nearest to me, my wife and children, and close relatives? Or is it meant to include my next door neighbour? or all the people that live in my block of flats? or all the people in my town, in my country, and in all the world? Where are we allowed to draw the line? Obviously, if I love my family as myself, and they are hungry, I can share my food equally with them. But if I try to share my food with every hungry person in my city, there won’t be enough to keep any of us alive. So who exactly is my ‘neighbour’? The term ‘neighbour’, he maintained, is too vague; and therefore the commandment is unrealistic and unworkable. This, then, was the excuse given by the expert in the Old Testament for why he did not carry out the second greatest commandment (Luke 10:25–29).

At this point get your students to discuss the following questions:

1. Was the expert’s excuse valid?

2. If not, how would you answer his objection?

3. Obviously, there would be no practical sense in our trying to share our small amount of food with every hungry person in the world. But there is enough food in the world to feed everyone. If all governments, all business men, all individuals everywhere loved their neighbours as themselves and shared the world’s food fairly, no one would starve. But the world at large does not carry out the second greatest commandment. Does that then give us a valid excuse for not carrying it out ourselves as far as we can?
The Parable of the Good Samaritan

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. (Luke 10:25–37)

This is one of the most famous of Jesus’ parables. So first get your students to read the parable simply as a story—or tell it to them in detail pointing out how vividly true to life its setting was. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho wound down through high, broken, cliffs where bandits could easily lurk and jump out on lonely travellers. Mugging was common then, as it is now.

The first major lesson of the parable

The parable has several lessons to teach. Let us deal first with its last and major point (10:36–37). The expert’s excuse for not loving his neighbour as himself was a theoretical difficulty: he did not know exactly to what person or persons the commandment was referring by the term ‘neighbour’ when it said ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. So he asked ‘Who is my neighbour?’ But from a practical point of view his theoretical question was irrelevant and rather silly. Not knowing exactly how many people in the world you may eventually be required to treat as your neighbour, does not stop you from acting as a neighbour to someone who at this very moment lies before your very feet in dire need. So when our Lord applied the lesson of his parable, he did not answer the expert’s theoretical question. Instead he asked the expert a different, practical question:

‘Which of the three men [the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan] proved neighbour [that is, acted like a neighbour], to the man that fell among robbers?’ There was no difficulty in answering that question! Even the expert had to admit that it was the Samaritan who acted like a neighbour and had compassion on the man in need. ‘Go and do likewise’, said Christ.

The first major lesson, then, is clear: our duty is to act in a compassionate, loving and practical way to those whom we actually encounter in daily life that are in any
need whatever, if we are able to help them. It is right, of course, that we should bear in mind the vast need throughout the world. But we should not allow our personal inability to do much about that need, to paralyse us into doing nothing about the need that we actually meet around us day by day. And certainly we should not use it as an excuse for not acting as a loving neighbour to as many as we can.

This lesson can be reinforced as follows. Another way of expressing the commandment ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ is to say, as Jesus did on another occasion: ‘Whatever you would that people should do to you, that do also yourself to them’ (Matt 7:12). If you were mugged like the man in the parable, and were lying half dead on the road, would you not want the passers-by to help you? Would you not complain bitterly if they ignored you? Well then, treat anyone who is in any need whatever, in the same way as you would wish to be treated if you were in that need.

The second lesson of the parable

The second lesson of the parable is that if our religion does not move us to love our neighbour as ourselves, it is inadequate, if not completely false. Since the story which our Lord told was a parable, and not the record of an actual incident, he was free to choose the characters in the story. His choice of a priest and a Levite as the men who passed by without raising a finger to help the wounded man is therefore very significant. Both the priest and the Levite were religious functionaries in the temple of God at Jerusalem; they ought to have been the very first to love their neighbour as themselves. Why didn’t they? Had they been going up to Jerusalem to begin a tour of duty in the temple, they might well have been afraid to touch a nearly dead man, because according to their religious regulations contact with a dead body would have defiled them and temporarily unfitted them for taking part in the temple services (see OT book of Numbers 19). But they were not going up to Jerusalem. Their tour of duty was over and they were going down from Jerusalem back home (10:31). They had no valid reason, then, for not helping the wounded man. Perhaps they thought that their job was loving God and serving him in the temple; and that they could leave ‘loving their neighbour as themselves’ to other people to do. If so, they were very mistaken.

It is true that the first commandment is, as we saw in our last chapter, that we should love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength; and that this must always have priority. But it is not enough by itself. The New Testament comments: ‘If anyone says, I love God, and yet hates his brother, he is a liar: for anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.’ And again: ‘If any one has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?’ (1 John 4:20; 3:17)

The third lesson of the parable

‘Loving your neighbour as yourself’ means that you must be prepared to act the good and compassionate neighbour not only towards you friends, your fellow countrymen, and people whom you like, but also towards people you do not like, and even
towards you enemies. We see that from the fact that Christ depicted the man who helped the robbers’ victim as a Samaritan.

**Note on the Samaritans.** The Samaritans had at least part of the same Bible as the Jews had; but they worshipped in a different place from the Jews. The Jews, therefore, hated the Samaritans, and sometimes persecuted them; and the Samaritans often returned the hostility. See Luke 9:51–56; John 4.

Now in the parable when the Samaritan saw the wounded man lying by the roadside, he would have immediately recognised him as a Jew. Moreover, he would have known that if this Jew had been uninjured and a Samaritan attempted to touch him, the Jew would have insulted him, if not spat in his face. But in spite of all that the Samaritan went to him, rendered first aid, gave up his seat on the ass to him, and walked himself; took him to an inn and paid the cost of his stay there until he recovered.

The lesson is clear. ‘Loving our neighbour as ourselves’ means more than loving just our family and friends, our fellow countrymen and people of the same religion or ethnic group. We must love and serve people of all ethnic groups, of all religions, and even those who hate us and are our enemies. Jesus said (Luke 6:27–28): ‘But I say unto you . . . Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who despitefully use you.’ And certainly no follower of Christ is allowed to persecute people of other religions.

**A practical problem**

We have now found that in Christian ethics the basic motivation for carrying out both the first and the second greatest commandments is love. But just here there lies a fundamental problem. The reason why we do not behave as we should either towards God or towards our neighbour is precisely because we do not really love them. What is more, try as hard as we can, we often find it difficult if not impossible to love them. It would be useless, therefore, for Jesus simply to tell us that we ought to love God and our neighbour, if he could not tell us where we can get the love from to love them with. For without the fuel of love, the engine of Christian ethics will not work.

But Christ has seen the problem; and here is one of his answers to it:

**The Story of the Woman in Simon’s House**

And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to meat. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner. And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the
one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

Wherefore I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also? And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace. (Luke 7:36–50)

Read and re-tell the whole story.

Observations

1. A vivid contrast. On the one hand a woman who had in the past been very sinful, but now loved Jesus intensely and showed it in her actions. On the other, an outwardly moral and very religious man who was formally polite to Jesus and invited him to dinner, but had no love or affection for him and showed it by his inaction.

2. The parable of the two debtors. The parable establishes the simple but fundamentally important point that when a man has run up a large debt which he cannot possibly pay; if then his creditor forgives him, he will love his creditor. In other words forgiveness produces love; and the greater the debt, the greater the love when the debt is forgiven.

3. The application of the parable. Sin is like debt; and we have all sinned. Moreover we cannot pay our debt. No amount of good works in the future can cancel the debt of the past. Since our normal duty is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, we could never exceed our duty and so have something extra with which to pay for our shortcomings in the past. Moreover if I owe ten billion roubles and I cannot pay, I am bankrupt. But if I owe only one thousand roubles, and I cannot pay, I am still bankrupt. Whether we have sinned much or little we are all spiritually bankrupt.

But Christ can forgive us our sins; and when he does so, and puts the assurance of forgiveness into our hearts, it produces in our hearts a spontaneous love for God, and Christ, and for all mankind: a love that was not there before, and a love which we could never work up by our own will power.

4. Christ’s explanation of the woman’s love. She had been a very great sinner. But she had been converted through faith in Jesus. And Jesus had forgiven all her sins, and assured her of God’s pardon and acceptance. The result was that there sprang up in her heart a love for Jesus that she could not keep hidden.

5. The implied diagnosis of Simon’s lovelessness. Simon was very religious, and outwardly, at least, morally correct. But he had no love for Jesus, nor any sympathy with the woman’s demonstration of her love for Jesus. Why so? Because, it would seem, he had never had a conversion experience, had never realised how sinful he was in fact, had
never come to Jesus for forgiveness, and had no assurance of forgiveness in his heart. His religion may have been formally correct, and his morals outwardly respectable; but he had no power to love the Lord his God with all his heart, or to love his neighbour as himself.

One final lesson

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellow-servant, fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses. (Matt 18:21–35)

This is another parable in which Jesus likens sin to debt. Read the parable through. It is another example of Jesus’ ability to evoke an intensely vivid scene with the minimum of words. Its relevance to our present study will be obvious. It tells us that a man who claims to have had his sins forgiven by Christ, and who nevertheless is not prepared to forgive someone who has sinned against him, even when that someone repents, is no true Christian. He is an impostor.
Jesus the Teacher (4)

The Christian Attitude to Work

In this chapter we are going to study our daily work. Some people enjoy their work so much that they have little interest in anything else. Other people find work so hard and boring that they wish they did not have to work. Still others, suffering the miseries of unemployment, would be glad to have any kind of work to do, however hard.

Jesus had many things to say about our daily work: but this above all, that it is of the utmost importance, first to control our work by the moral and spiritual principles of God’s kingdom, and secondly always to remember that our daily work carries eternal significance and potential for good or ill. Jesus thus:

1. provides us with strong and true motivation for work;
2. teaches us how to get the maximum benefit out of our work;
3. warns us not to allow daily work to crowd out life’s truest, highest and most lasting riches.

Begin, then, your lesson by asking some questions to help your students consider necessary distinctions in relation to work.

1. Why do we have to work?

Probable answer: in order to produce food, or to earn money in order to buy food, clothes and all the other things that we need and enjoy.

This is a good answer as far as it goes, and the Bible reinforces it (2 Thess 3:7–12). The Creator has designed us with stomachs that get hungry and demand food. The Creator has provided food (though in many parts of the world it is badly distributed); but at the same time he has arranged things so that we have to work in order to get it.

2. Are there any other rewards and benefits which we get from work besides food, clothes and money?

Some probable answers:

(a) Physical work is good for the body. Lack of exercise weakens the heart and muscles.

(b) It is boring, and psychologically unhealthy, to have nothing to do.
(c) Work itself can be enjoyable. It is hard work to be a professional footballer or ballet-dancer. But the work itself is enjoyable, quite apart from the money it earns.

(d) It is psychologically satisfying to feel that one is needed. It is hard work for a mother to look after her children; but she likes to feel that her children need her, and is willing to work hard for them, even though she does not get paid for her work.

I. The prime motivation and the prime reward for work

*Developing a righteous character*

According to Christ one of the chief rewards that we should look for from our daily work, whether we are paid for it or not, is that work builds character. What he says is:

> So do not worry, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink?, or What shall we wear? For the pagans seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well. (Matt 6:31–33)

Christ is not saying that it is wrong to go to work in order to earn a living. God himself knows that we need food and clothes, and work is the normal way of getting these necessities. But these things are not the chief benefit we get from work, nor should they be our prime motivation for going to work. We are to seek first, says Christ, the kingdom of God and his righteousness; that is to say our first aim is to carry out God’s kingly rule in all that we do, so that as we constantly obey his rule, we may develop a righteous character.

*An illustration:* Suppose a man wants to become a world-class footballer. How can he do it? He can, of course, begin by reading about football in a book and learning the rules. But reading is not enough. To become a good footballer, he must go out onto the football field and practise regularly. In this way he will train himself to react quickly, to control his passes and his temper, and to keep the rules and not cheat when the referee is not looking. Such training not only helps him to win matches: it does something to him as a person. It develops his abilities, and builds up his character as a clean player and an honest man. On the other hand, if he cheats like Maradonna did by handling the ball at a crucial moment, he may win the game for his team, but he will have damaged himself: he will be a less honest, a less good, man, as a result. His character, his quality as a man, will have been diminished.

And so it is in everyday life. The Bible tells us to be brave, truthful, honest, and not to cheat, tell lies, steal, be immoral, greedy, envious, jealous, spiteful, bad-tempered. But simply reading these commands in the Bible will not by itself build all these good qualities into our characters. For that to happen, we shall need constant practice at behaving ourselves as we should, and at resisting temptation. According to Christ, then, it is the chief benefit of daily work that it gives us this practice in obeying God’s rules of behaviour, so developing strong, healthy, righteous characters. On the other hand, we shall meet many temptations in the course of our daily work. If we
yield to them and are lazy and unreliable, or if we cheat and tell lies, or are greedy and selfish, we may appear to succeed, we may even gain more money; but we shall seriously, and perhaps permanently, damage ourselves and our own characters, and eventually suffer great loss.

**How serious and permanent could this damage be?**

Christ teaches that, though our work may well disappear and be forgotten, its effect on us and on our characters is everlasting. When, therefore, Christ met people who, though they pretended to be religious, were motivated simply by greed for money, and cared neither for God nor for their neighbour, he told them the famous, but solemn, story of *The Rich Man and Lazarus* (Luke 16:19–31). Get your class to read the story, or read it to them, and get them to decide why, according to the story, the rich man found himself in torments in the afterlife.

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent, And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead. (Luke 16:19–31)

It was not because in this life he was rich. It was because he had lived simply to make money for his own selfish enjoyment. The second greatest commandment of God’s law said, as we saw in our last chapter, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ Now at the rich man’s gate there lay a helpless beggar. But the rich man made no attempt to help him. It was not that the rich man did not know the commandments. He was reminded by Abraham that both he and his brothers had Moses and the Prophets, that is, the Old Testament. But he simply thought that it would make no real difference whether he obeyed the Bible or not, whether he did, or did not, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He found out, when it was too late to change his way of life, that the character that we form here on earth is of eternal endurance and significance.
II. On getting the maximum benefit out of work

Here read The Parable of the Rich Fool.

And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:13–21)

This parable also deals with the profit that we reap from daily work. Notice that it does not say that it was wrong for the farmer to work hard and make large profits. It is what he did with the profits that it criticised. Nor is he blamed for wanting to enjoy the profits; on the contrary, the complaint is that his false attitude to his profits guaranteed that he would get the minimum, rather than the maximum, enjoyment out of them.

His first mistake: he stored his crops in the wrong place. His fields had produced far more than his own immediate needs. So he decided to build bigger barns and store his crops here on earth; and then he would be able to say to himself: ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’

But he had forgotten that the length of our lives here on earth is uncertain. He had simply assumed that he was going to live for many years, whereas in fact he died suddenly that very night. And God called him a fool, because it now became evident that he had stored his goods in the wrong place. He must now leave them where he could no longer profit from them. From now on they would all belong to someone else.

But, someone will protest, where else could he have stored his goods? The Bible’s answer would be that if he had decided to use his goods for the benefit of others and not simply for himself, in this way he would have laid for himself treasure in heaven (Matt 6:19–21). The Bible says:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the world to come, so that they may take hold of the life to come that is truly life. (1 Tim 6:17–19)

But how does using one’s profit for other people’s good ‘lay up treasure for us as a firm foundation for the world to come?’ Let’s use an analogy. Suppose the government appoints a manager of a small engineering works. If he uses the profits
wisely to develop the factory, increase the workers’ standard of living, and enrich the local community, he will develop his own potential and skills as a manager, and the government may well promote him eventually to become manager of a much larger factory, or even minister of state for engineering. But suppose he yields to temptation and uses the profits to buy himself a palatial house and expensive cars, he will both ruin his character and unfit himself for promotion. Indeed, he may well be prosecuted and imprisoned.

In similar fashion, Christ teaches that a man’s attitude to life, and work, and goods and profits here in this life fits—or unfits—him for responsibilities in the life to come.

III. The danger of work crowding God out of life

*The rich farmer’s second mistake:* he forgot that if you would be truly wealthy, you need to become not only rich in material things, but rich spiritually as well. Material riches are small compared with spiritual riches.

A girl who treasured an engagement ring but had no interest in the man who gave it to her would empty the ring itself of its chief significance. The foolish farmer allowed material prosperity to crowd out of his life all thought of God and of fellowship with him and obedience to him. It brought him to spiritual poverty in this life; and he died, unprepared to meet God in the next. ‘This is how it will be,’ said Christ, ‘with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.’

If then we are to become rich toward God, we must remember that important as work is there is one overwhelmingly important priority in life: to cultivate friendship and fellowship with God. He is our Creator, and designed us to do our daily work. But he never intended us to be slaves. He wants us to work for him out of love. And if we are going to love him, we must first be reconciled to him, receive the Spirit of Jesus, God’s Son and become ourselves one of God’s freeborn sons (Rom 8:14–17). Only so shall we be able to put the principles of God’s kingdom into practice in our daily work. How then do we come to know God like this? Jesus tells us: he is the way to the Father (John 14:6).

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38–42)

**Question:** What relevance has this story to our present topic?
It is evident from Chapter 20 that Jesus taught that one of the chief frames of reference for Christian ethics is not only a wholehearted belief in the existence of a spiritual dimension to life in this world, but also a similarly rigorous belief in the reality of the life to come, in the existence of heaven and of hell. But many people who admire, and would like to follow, the ethics of Christ find it difficult to accept this frame of reference. Yet to reject it is to cut out of Christian ethics a great part of its motivation; and a system of ethics without an adequate motivation is practically useless. So let us deal here with two of the objections (among many others) that people feel against the very idea of heaven—and of hell.

**Objection 1.** Belief in heaven is merely escapism. It encourages people to put up with their miserable social and economic conditions on earth instead of vigorously struggling to improve them, in the vain expectation that they will be compensated for their sufferings here by a paradise in the world to come. It therefore devalues life here on earth, and undermines all serious effort to improve its conditions.

But the very reverse is true. Christ’s teaching about heaven and hell invests life here and all its activities with infinite importance. According to Christ anything less than a loving co-operation with our Creator in the use of our abilities and in the responsible development of earth’s resources for the glory of God and the good of our family, nation and world, will have ruinous and eternal consequences for us not only in this short, temporary life, but in the eternal world to come.

A child at school who believed that life ended when school ended at the age of sixteen and that there was no ‘real’ grown-up world beyond school, might well be tempted to play around and not take school and its lessons seriously. Indeed the trouble with some school children is precisely that they cannot imagine how serious life beyond school is; and therefore they waste their time at school and enter the adult world unprepared. And so, according to Christ, it will be with people who do not take heaven and hell seriously, for this life is the school that prepares us for the next.

Of course, the logical question to ask here is: what evidence have we that the world to come is real? The Bible’s answer to this is to point to the historical evidence for the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We shall deal with this evidence later in the series. It suffices to say here that, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the past is the guarantee that one
day in the future all who have trusted him in this life will be raised to live with him in the world to come. And it is the fact that the world to come is real that assures us that our work here on earth is worth doing, and worth doing to please the Lord himself who gave it to us. We are, as he Bible puts it, to be ‘always abounding in the work of the Lord, because we know that our labour is not in vain in the Lord’ (1 Cor 15:58). Thus belief in the reality of the life to come provides powerful motivation for life here and now.

**Objection 2. If there is a God, then we ought to serve him out of love and not for what we get out of it in the form of some reward in heaven.**

But this objection dissolves when we understand first what the reward for serving God is not, and then what it is.

Contrary to what many people think, the reward for good works is not salvation and acceptance with God, nor forgiveness and eternal life. These things, the Bible explicitly states, are free gifts; they cannot be earned by our good works: ‘By grace [that is, God’s unmerited favour] are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works . . .’ (Eph 2:8–9). This fact, that acceptance with God cannot be earned, is something that many people find very hard to understand. They are used to paying for what they get and think that human beings have the ability to pay God for his salvation through their good works. This shows that they have underestimated the seriousness of God’s diagnosis of human sin. The Bible explains that ‘no one will be declared righteous in his [i.e. God’s] sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin’ (Rom 3:20). And that is true. When we try to keep God’s law in our human strength we find that we fail, that we ‘all have sinned and come short of the glory of God’ (Rom 3:23). If God is going to forgive us, it will have to be on the basis of his love and grace — no human being will ever be able to boast that he has earned forgiveness. This is why the Bible points us away from our own works to what Christ did on the cross when he ‘died for our sins’. It is faith in his work, not ours that alone can save.

At this point there is often a protest: ‘If you tell me that acceptance with God is not based on my good deeds then you undermine ethics. For are you not in effect saying that I can live as I like and God will still forgive me?’ No! In the very place where the Bible tells us that salvation is not a reward for good works it also says of those who believe in Christ: ‘For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do’ (Eph 2:10). That is, good works are the outcome and evidence of acceptance by God and not its basis. We shall see two examples of this below.

But what then is the reward for good work? It is the ability and the opportunity to engage in more, and more important, work. Read the famous *Parable of the Pounds*:

And as they heard these things, he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear. He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return. And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come. But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us. And it came to pass, that when he was returned, having received the kingdom, then he
commanded these servants to be called unto him, to whom he had given the money, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities. And the second came, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained five pounds. And he said likewise to him, Be thou also over five cities. And another came, saying, Lord, behold, here is thy pound, which I have kept laid up in a napkin: For I feared thee, because thou art an austere man: thou takest up that thou layedst not down, and reapest that thou didst not sow. And he saith unto him, Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant. Thou knewest that I was an austere man, taking up that I laid not down, and reaping that I did not sow: wherefore then gavest thou not my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury? And he said unto them that stood by, Take from him the pound, and give it to him that hath ten pounds. (And they said unto him, Lord, he hath ten pounds.) For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him. But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me. (Luke 19:11–27)

Notice that the man who had used his pound well and wisely and had turned it into ten pounds, was rewarded by being given the responsibility of administering ten cities—a hugely greater amount of work than looking after ten pounds. After all it is only reasonable that a child who has worked responsibly and hard at running a small engineering works should eventually be put in charge of a large industrial complex.

**The effect of salvation in the Christian work ethic**

And it came to pass, that as he was come nigh unto Jericho, a certain blind man sat by the wayside begging: And hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant. And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by. And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought unto him: and when he was come near, he asked him, saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight. And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee. And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God. And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycomore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house. And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, that he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord; Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 18:35–19:10)
The men in these two stories were in many respects very different. The beggar was very poor, the tax-collector was very rich. But they had this in common: both men had an undesirable and degrading way of making a living. The beggar lived on what he could scrounge out of other people; the tax-collector, in large part, on what he could swindle out of other people. But then Christ saved both of them; and the effect of salvation was that it completely changed the attitude of each man to work and to the way he made his living, and restored both of them to true human dignity.

A. The blind man

It was not his own fault, of course, that he was forced to beg for a living (though it is an indictment of the society in which he lived and of many societies still that disabled people were, and are, heartlessly ignored). But nonetheless it is a demeaning thing when a human being loses his independence and dignity, and instead of being able to maintain himself and contribute to the good of the community, is obliged to live on what he can scrounge out of others.

Christ saved the man by doing a miracle and restoring his physical sight. But there is more to the story.

1. The beggar’s spiritual perception. The crowd informed him that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was passing by. But the beggar had come to the conviction that this Jesus was no less than the Son of David, the Messiah and King. So he begged the King to use his divine, kingly power to give him his sight. And he was given his request. It proved to be the last time he needed to beg for anything from anybody else.

2. The beggar’s reaction to the gift of sight. The first sight he saw would have been the King himself. What did he expect to see? Someone dressed up in royal robes, served by an army of courtiers and himself serving nobody? What he actually saw was a dusty, travel-stained, simply dressed figure, a King who had come to be the servant of all, whose self-sacrificing motto was this: ‘the Son of Man has come, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:24–27). Catching sight of this King, the beggar quit begging and ‘followed Christ in the way’ of self-sacrificing service, as all Christ’s true disciples are expected to do.

Here, then, is the great ideal at the heart of Christian ethics: the perception that Jesus is the Son of God, the Son of the Owner of the Universe, but that he came as the Servant–King to serve and to save us at the cost of his life. Anyone who has the spiritual sight to see that, cannot help but follow him and take the same attitude to life and work as he took.

B. The tax-collector

Here was a man who was so consumed with greed that he was prepared to work for the hated Roman imperialists and collect their taxes for them from his own nation, thus making money out of his own people’s slavery. Not only so, he used his authority to extort from the people far more money than the Romans demanded, pocketing the excess himself. Perhaps he thought that his great wealth would make everybody fear and respect, if not admire, him. Instead they hated him and rejected
him from all social intercourse. Understandably so, for here was a man hideously
demeaned and distorted by selfish greed and love of money, a lost man destroying by
his pursuit of riches the very acceptance, love and friendship he longed for, but could
never find in mere money, let alone in tainted wealth. But Christ saw the longing of
the impoverished inner heart and soul of this outwardly rich man, and he worked a
miracle of transformation within him. He gave the man his (completely undeserved)
friendship, accepted him as he was. And suddenly the man found his poverty of heart
banished. He no longer felt a consuming compulsion to make money. Christ’s
unearned and unbought friendship had flooded him with such a sense of spiritual
wealth, that he immediately decided to give half of his material fortune away, and to
restore fourfold to anyone he had cheated.

Greed and love of money dehumanise a man; mere denunciation of excessive
riches very often locks the greedy man inside his self-made prison. The wealth of the
love and friendship of Christ opens that prison door and sets a man free to be truly
human, to be the master and not the slave of money, to see that people are infinitely
more valuable than things and possessions, and to learn, as Jesus taught, that it is
more blessed to give than to receive.

These two examples show us clearly how God’s salvation actually works. He is
prepared to accept people as they are, provided only that they trust Christ; and then
their consciousness that they have been accepted and assured of Christ’s permanent
friendship both in this life and in the life to come motivates them to grateful service to
him and others.

Suggestions for discussion:

1. Why is belief in heaven not escapism?

2. Which of the following marriage situations would you think to be
   preferable:

   (a) where a man tells his wife-to-be that he is not prepared to
       assure her of his acceptance of her unless and until she
       earns it by her good works?

   (b) where the man first unconditionally assures his wife-to-be
       of his acceptance and then, secure in his love, she loves him
       and seeks to please him in return?

Most people would regard (a) as highly unsatisfactory—an insult
to the woman. It would, if she accepted it, turn her into a slave. It
is strange, therefore, that millions of people think that their
relationship with God must be of type (a).
We are now to consider Christ’s concern for people and the way in which he valued each human personality.

Begin the lesson by asking several of your students: ‘What is your name?’ Then put to them the more difficult question: ‘What does your name represent?’

Suggestions for discussion:

1. **What is the difference between a number and a name?** A soldier is known as Private 105769, say. What does that tell you about him?

2. **What is the difference between a name and a label?** The label ‘Plum Jam’ does not distinguish between pots of plum jam—it only distinguishes them from other kinds of jam. Many girls have the name ‘Natasha’ which certainly distinguishes them from girls whose name is ‘Irina’. But not all Natashas are the same!

3. **What does a human name represent?** In the past names carried meanings. ‘Andrew’, for instance, meant ‘brave’; ‘Irina’ meant ‘peace’. But even so, those names did not fully describe the person who bore the name; and nowadays names have lost their meanings anyway. But never mind. Even though your name may be a common one, what it represents is something awesomely wonderful: human personality. There are, and have been, billions of human beings in the world. But your individual personality is utterly unique: there is not another ‘you’ in all the universe. You are unique in your genetic make up.

**Christ’s concern for damaged personalities**

Although each human personality is unique, it is the sad fact that we are all flawed or damaged in some way. It is the purpose of Christ’s coming and of his teaching to heal us. The following story is an extreme case; but it makes the point easier to grasp. Read it to your class, and ask them to look out for the crucial turning point in the story and tell you what it is.
The Healing of the Demoniac

And they came over unto the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gadarenes. And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains: because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones. But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him, and cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not. For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit. And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many. And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country. Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding. And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them. And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand;) and were choked in the sea. And they that fed the swine fled, and told it in the city, and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that was done. And they saw it and told them how it befell to him that was possessed with the devil, and also concerning the swine. And they began to pray him to depart out of their coasts. And when he was come into the ship, he that had been possessed with the devil prayed him that he might be with him. Howbeit Jesus suffered him not, but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee. And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done, for him: and all men did marvel. (Mark 5:1–20)

1. The disintegration of the demoniac’s personality. We do not know what name the man had been given at birth. But apparently, later in life alien powers had invaded him and overmastered his personality. Very likely he tried at first to resist them and retain control over himself; but they were too strong for him. In the end he gave up trying to be himself, and when asked what his name was, he replied ‘Legion’.

2. The cause of the trouble. The symptoms indicate serious mental illness and disintegration of personality; but in this case (not in all cases) the Bible points out that the mental sickness was caused by demon possession.

Take the opportunity, therefore, to warn the class against experimenting with occult practices, black magic, spiritism or anything of this sort.

According to the Bible—and modern experience in many countries—demon possession is an all too real possibility; and its effect in the end is to overpower, if not destroy, human personality. It is for this reason God solemnly warns in the Old Testament: ‘Let no one be found among you . . . who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft or casts spells, or who is a medium or
who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to
the LORD . . . ’ (Deut 18:9–13).

Alcoholism and drug-taking can have similarly dramatic and easily visible effects; but all sin distorts the personality; and unless forgiven and its power broken, will lead to what the Bible calls ‘perishing’: not cessation of existence but irrecoverable distortion, of the personality, and in the end eternal separation from God.

3. Effects of the trouble:

(a) Shamelessness and loss of self-respect. The parallel account in Luke 8:27 says that ‘for a long time he had worn no clothes’. He had lost all sense of shame.

   Here discuss with your class the positive role that shame has to play in preserving human dignity. Take ‘blushing’ for example. It is a mechanism which the Creator has built into us: it exposes our feelings of guilt for all to see, and also makes us feel uncomfortable when we have been caught out in some wrong deed or attitude. It also acts as a healthy deterrent and preservative: ‘I can’t do such and such a thing’ we say to ourselves; ‘I would blush with shame if I were found out.’

   But when people constantly do shameful things, they gradually weaken this shame mechanism in their personalities, if not put it out of action altogether. The result is disastrous: ‘Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?’ God asks; ‘No! they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush’ (Jer 6:15). Similarly the Bible says of other perverse sinners: ‘Therefore God abandoned them to the sinful desires of their hearts, to . . . the degrading of their bodies’ (Rom 1:24–27).

(b) Morbid fear and anti-social behaviour: like some drug addicts and alcoholics he probably felt frightened by other people. At any rate, he avoided society living in lonely places on the mountains and in the tombs. He was an extreme example of what many people, sometimes even young people, feel: they are no good; nobody values them; society demands too much of them and they feel threatened by what people expect of them; they want to escape from life’s organised routine; they feel there’s no future for them, they might as well be dead.

(c) Self-loathing and self-destructiveness. He would constantly cut himself with stones, and violently opposed any attempt to restrain him for his own good. And when Jesus commanded the evil powers that were destroying him to depart, the man at first thought that even Jesus was adding to his torture. So it is with many ‘normal’ people. They dimly realise that their sins and bad habits are damaging them; but when Jesus commands them to let these things go, they think that Jesus means to make life miserable for them.

4. The cure of the trouble. But, of course, Jesus had not come to torture him, but to restore his broken personality, his dignity and true freedom. And this is why Jesus asked him: ‘what is your name?’ The man had virtually given up trying to be himself. Asked his name, he replied, not ‘John’ or ‘Andrew’ or whatever his own name was, but ‘Legion’. Christ disentangled the man himself from the evil powers that were dominating him, banished the evil powers, and set the man’s personality free. And his
fellow townsmen found him sitting clothed and in his right mind at the feet of Jesus (Luke 8:35). Now Jesus and not Legion was his lord; and Jesus’ lordship means true freedom.

We now turn from this extreme case to think how Jesus sets us free today.

**Jesus sets us free**

1. **By forgiving our sins.** One story tells how, faced with a paralysed man, Jesus first forgave his sins and then gave him power to get up and walk (Luke 5:17–26). When we sin we feel guilt and a bad conscience. And guilt is like a chain: it binds us and often makes us afraid to look the world in the face. Now one of the words for ‘forgiveness’ in the New Testament means ‘a release’; and it is this that Jesus effects. We can hold our heads high again.

2. **By telling us the truth.** ‘If you continue in my word’, says Jesus (John 8:31–36), ‘then you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.’

   All too often we pride ourselves on the very things that distort our personalities. We think it is clever to lie and cheat. We boast about our aggressiveness. We enjoy being spiteful and cruel and making others feel small. Jesus sets us free by showing us the truth about these false attitudes: they are not our friends, they are our gaolers. If we mistake gaolers for friends, we shall remain imprisoned and make no attempt to escape. One day these false ‘friends’ will be our executioners. On the other hand we may feel that it is no good trying to escape: the bad habits and false attitudes are too strong to break. Here too Jesus shows us the truth about the situation: the chains can be broken; as with the demoniac, ‘Legion’ can be driven out.

3. **By setting us free from fear.** Some fear is healthy. Fear of getting burned, for instance, stops us putting our hand into the fire. But some fear is unhealthy. Fear of being laughed at, fear of the gang, fear of violence can compel young people to get drunk, go on drugs, commit crime, whereas, left to themselves, they would not do these things. Jesus teaches us to develop a healthy fear of God, and to let it overcome the false fear.

   And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt 10:28–31)

**The value of human beings**

Ask the class whether it is important for them to sense that they are valued and how it is they recognise that they are valued.

If, then, we are going to treat one another as we should, we must learn to value others and ourselves as God values both them and us. Each of the brief comments below can
be used to stimulate class discussion (or to be the subject of a short essay which could then be the basis of a discussion).

1. **The value of the unborn child.** Psalm 139:13–17 tells us that God watches over and loves the unborn child while it is being formed in the womb. To kill an unborn child is a crime against both the child and its Creator.

2. **The value of a babe-in-arms.** When mothers brought their babies to Jesus for him to bless them, the apostles at first rebuked the mothers. They thought that Jesus was too important to trouble himself with babies. But Jesus rebuked the apostles. God values babies as much as he values adults. They too are persons. ‘Allow the little children to come to me’, said Jesus, ‘for of such is the kingdom of heaven’ (Luke 18:15–17).

3. **The respect and support due to:**
   - (a) **Parents** (Matt 15:1–9). We are to honour them; and, as is clear from this passage, honouring them means not just respecting them and obeying them when we are young, but maintaining them financially when they are old.
   - (b) **Widows.** Jesus showed a special concern for widows. Some of his strongest denunciations were delivered against those who took advantage of their helplessness and cheated or oppressed them (Luke 7:11–17; 18:1–8; 20:45–21:4).
   - (c) **The institution of marriage** (Matt 5:27–32). Christ points out with devastating clarity the seriousness of adultery and easy divorce which devalue human relationships and destroy the stability of the family.

4. **The value of the individual.** A shepherd may have a hundred sheep that all look alike to a stranger. But if he is a good shepherd, he will know every sheep by name, its character, its strengths and its weaknesses. Christ is just such a shepherd: ‘he calls all his sheep by name’ (John 10:3). God loves us not simply as mankind in general, but as individuals. And Jesus guarantees that he will never lose so much as one individual that commits himself or herself to him:

   For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:38–40)

   My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand. I and my Father are one. (John 10:27–30)
All those who attempt to teach the ethics of Jesus will sooner or later come up against the objection: ‘What’s the use of teaching Christian ethics? They have been preached for nearly 2,000 years, and yet the world is still as evil as ever it was.’

At a superficial level we could rightly reply: ‘If people don’t use soap and water, and as a result remain dirty, it is unfair to blame the soap!’

But many will object: ‘Of course it is not the soap’s fault! But that does not alter the fact that if people persistently refuse to use soap, you will never make the world a clean place by simply preaching the virtues of soap. You will need to find some way of compelling them to use soap. And if you cannot do that, you might as well give up.’

There is, to be honest, a great deal of force in this objection, as we can see if we use another analogy. If you want the two sides in a football match to play the game according to the rules, it is not enough simply to teach the players what the rules are. You will have to have a referee to enforce the rules. If you don’t, then one side will begin to cheat. And then the other side will say to themselves: ‘It’s no good our trying to keep the rules. If we don’t cheat like the others, we shall lose the game.’ So now both sides will cheat whenever they can.

So what about Jesus? He certainly taught ethics. But did he think it was enough simply to teach ethics? Or did he have something to say about the enforcement of ethics?

Such questions show how important it is to understand exactly what it was that Jesus came to do, and how he proposed to achieve it. The New Testament makes it clear that he came with the prime objective of setting up the kingdom, that is, the government, of God. His very first words were: ‘The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news’ (Mark 1:15). The reason for saying that the kingdom of God had now, at this particular point in history, drawn near was that he himself, so he claimed, was God’s King whose coming had long been promised in the Old Testament (see, for instance, Zech 9:9 and compare this with John 12:12–15). And now he had come! This was very good news.

Setting up the kingdom of God necessarily involved Jesus in the first place in enunciating the standards of behaviour that would be expected of all who were admitted into his kingdom and the blessedness of those who lived by those standards. This is what the famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is.
Some comments on the ethical requirements of God’s kingdom

1. They are often contrary to popular accepted human standards

One example will be enough to illustrate the point:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matt 5:43–48)

Admittedly, this is so contrary to normal, practice that many people reject it as unworkable. But there is no denying that if everyone behaved in this way there would be no discrimination against minority groups, no ethnic cleansing, and no aggressive nationalism.

2. They must be carried out in practice and not remain mere theory

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matt 7:21–27)

The famous ancient Roman philosopher, Seneca, wrote many tracts expounding Stoicism and telling other people how to behave. But he used his position in the State to acquire a vast personal fortune; and when the Emperor Nero murdered his own mother, the Empress Agrippina, Seneca helped Nero to write a letter to the Roman Senate covering up Nero’s crime. But it is not only pagan philosophers that can be guilty of this inconsistency. Christ himself pointed out that some of the Bible teachers of his day were guilty of not practising themselves what they said other people should practise (Matthew 23).

3. They apply not only to outward acts, but to inward thoughts and motives

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matt 5:21–22)
In other words, to fulfil the command of God’s law ‘Thou shalt not murder’, it is not enough to abstain from actually murdering someone. If we get violently angry with someone, it is, of course, good to restrain ourselves and refrain from actual murder. But it is all too possible while refraining from actual murder, to nurse anger and desire for revenge in our hearts and secretly to think of all the ways in which we would enjoy hurting the person concerned if we could. And that, according to Jesus, is a breaking of God’s law; it is sin against our neighbour and against God, just as actual murder would be.

Incidentally, we should notice here a very important distinction between God’s law and the laws of any given country. Human governments can, and should, pass laws against murder and other crimes; and if people break those laws by actually committing a crime, they are rightly punished. But no human government can read our hearts and know our thoughts (governments that have tried to control people’s thinking have become monstrous tyrants). But God can, and does, read our hearts and thoughts, and holds us responsible for them.

**Points to consider.** When Hitler got angry he had the power to put his anger into action; and the result was that he killed millions of people. If when we get very angry, we had power like Hitler had, what would happen?

**Man’s inability to keep God’s law**

These, then, are a few examples of the ethical requirements of God’s kingdom, as Jesus taught them. What, then, did Jesus say about our ability to keep them? Here Jesus shows his profound understanding of human nature and his utter realism: he said it was impossible for us to keep God’s commandments well enough to qualify for entry into the kingdom of God.

*Example.* On one occasion Christ remarked to his disciples: ‘how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.’ His disciples were amazed at this and said ‘Who then can be saved?’ And Jesus replied, ‘With man this is impossible’ (Mark 10:23–27). We can be thankful that he added: ‘. . . but not with God. All things are possible with God.’ But his reply underlines the point that we made at the beginning of this lesson: it is no good simply teaching people Christian ethics. The reason is that by themselves people do not have the strength (and often not the desire either) to carry out God’s laws to God’s satisfaction. Jesus was fully aware of this, of course, and he gave us reasons why this is so. Here are two of them.

1. **Man is basically evil**

   If you, then, in spite of the fact that you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? (Luke 11:13)

Now many people think that this teaching is grotesquely exaggerated. They point out that in spite of much evil in the world, most people are kind and loving, and ready to
do all kinds of good deeds. But Jesus does not deny it. Indeed he calls attention to the fact that most human fathers are kind and good to their children. But they are that, he said, in spite of being basically evil.

Naturally we do not like being told this. We prefer to think that we are basically good. So, when we do something good, we readily take the credit for it: ‘I did that’, we say. But when we do something bad, we often try to excuse ourselves: ‘That was not really me’, we say, ‘I don’t know what made me do it.’ But if it wasn’t ‘really me’ who did it, who was it? ‘No good tree bears bad fruit’, says Christ, ‘nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn-bushes, or grapes from briers’ (Luke 6:43–44).

Christ is making two points:

(a) If you have an apple tree that produces forty percent, or even ten percent, rotten apples every year, you say, ‘There’s something seriously wrong with that tree.’ And man’s behaviour is certainly more than ten percent below God’s standards!

(b) It is no use a bush saying ‘I know I have produced a lot of thorns; but I’m not a thorn-bush really: I’m a fig tree!’ A tree’s fruit shows what the nature of the tree is. Similarly our bad deeds are not some superficial phenomenon unrelated to our basic nature. They are the product of that nature and show what that nature is.

Any system of ethics, if it is going to be realistic, must recognise this. History has constantly shown it to be true. There was, for instance, much that was good in Marxist economic theory. It failed because it did not recognise that man’s trouble was not just alienation from the means of production, but the basic sinfulness of his heart. That was enough to ruin any economic system, however good in theory. Capitalism may, or may not, be a better economic system; but it too suffers endless corruption from the same source.

2. Man is a rebel against God

This has been demonstrated by what has become the central point of all human history. When God sent his Son into the world, men not only rejected his ethical teaching: they crucified him. And it was not the drug addicts, criminals and Mafia alone who crucified him: it was the religious and political establishment urged on by the demand of the general populace.

But in the week before he was crucified Jesus analysed and expounded the cause and significance of his death by telling The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen.

Then began he to speak to the people this parable; A certain man planted a vineyard, and let it forth to husbandmen, and went into a far country for a long time. And at the season he sent a servant to the husbandmen, that they should give him of the fruit of the vineyard: but the husbandmen beat him, and sent him away empty. And again he sent another servant: and they beat him also, and entreated him shamefully, and sent him away empty. And again he sent a third: and they wounded him also, and cast him out. Then said the lord of the vineyard, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son: it may be they will reverence him when they see him. But when the husbandmen saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, This is the heir: come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours. So they cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him.
What therefore shall the lord of the vineyard do unto them? He shall come and destroy these husbandmen, and shall give the vineyard to others. And when they heard it, they said, God forbid. And he beheld them, and said, What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner? Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And the chief priests and the scribes the same hour sought to lay hands on him; and they feared the people: for they perceived that he had spoken this parable against them. (Luke 20:9–19)

Get your students to read this passage (or read it to them). Make sure they can answer the following questions:

1. Who is represented by the man who planted the vineyard?
2. Who is represented by the husbandmen? The Jews? or every man, as well, including us?
3. What does the vineyard represent?
4. Who is represented by the ‘beloved son’ (20:13)?
5. Why is he called ‘the heir’ (20:14)?

Notice that the husbandmen are not accused of having done their work badly. Their basic fault was this: they wanted to live and work just for themselves; to act as if the vineyard belonged to them and not to the owner and his son. This made them rebels against the owner; and that is why they rejected and killed his son. The parable gives a striking diagnosis and picture of what is the basic trouble with every human heart.

The lesson so far

It was, then, no good just teaching ethics: Christ had to do something about man’s rebellious heart and to make him both willing and able to enter God’s kingdom and keep his laws. What was that something? And why did he not force everybody to accept that something whatever it was? And what did he say he would do to those who persistently refused to accept it?

These and other questions we must answer in our next chapter.
If people misbehave only because they do not know what is right and what is wrong, then clearly it would be sufficient to teach them Christian ethics and they would all begin at once to behave properly. But ignorance of what is right and wrong is not man’s only—and certainly not his basic—problem. According to Christ man’s basic nature is fundamentally flawed and evil, and lurking in his heart is a self-centred rebellion against God; so that even when he knows quite clearly what God’s will is, he finds he cannot do it as he should, and does not necessarily want to do it anyway. Simply teaching such a man Christian ethics would obviously not be enough. It would be like telling a man with a damaged heart valve that he ought to walk energetically. He would be unable to do it, unless his heart was repaired first.

And so if anyone is going to be admitted into God’s kingdom and to be empowered to live according to Christ’s ethical standards, there must first come a revolutionary change of heart. The inborn fear, resentment, independence, enmity against God must be broken down, and replaced by faith and love and dependence on God. Here is the story of how Jesus effected this miracle of change in the hearts of two very different people. The first man was an outlaw, the second a highly respected religious teacher. Yet both needed this change of heart. As we study their cases we shall find basic principles of entry into Christ’s kingdom which are valid for us all.

### The conversion of a criminal

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:39–43)

### Basic facts to be noted

1. This man was not simply a petty thief or house burglar. He was a bandit or brigand. The word used to describe him in the New Testament is used by the near-
contemporary historian, Josephus, to denote political terrorists. The man may have been a mixture of all these things.

2. For years, then, he had obeyed nobody, accepted no king, recognised no government. He was an extreme example of rebellion against both God and his fellow men.

3. All the more significant was his eventual change of heart.

Trace, then, with your class the steps that changed this man from being a rebel against God and men, into a willing and obedient subject of Christ’s kingdom. Here are a few hints to follow:

(a) He came to see and to admit that compared with Jesus he and his fellow criminal were sinful and deserved the penalty that the human government was imposing on them (vv. 40–41).

(b) But Jesus was sinless and innocent; yet he was suffering along with the guilty.

(c) Therefore the government that had condemned Jesus was itself guilty of a deliberate miscarriage of justice.

(d) Jesus claimed to be God’s Messiah and King. The government denied it. That is why they were crucifying him, as they indicated by having the charge against him placarded on his cross: ‘This is Jesus the King of the Jews.’ Who was right? Jesus or the government? Obviously not this unjust government. Then Jesus was. And that means that Jesus was the Messiah–King sent into the world by God. He was God’s Son.

(e) That being so, death would not be the end for Jesus. Jesus would come again to reign and to set up God’s kingdom on earth.

(f) But that produced a solemn fear of God in the criminal’s heart and conscience. Here was Jesus, the sinless, condemned by the unjust government to suffer along with the guilty. If God cared for justice, then, there would most certainly come a day of judgment when earth’s wrongs and injustices would be put right.

(g) But if so, what hope was there for the criminal himself? He too—and not just the government!—was sinful and guilty before God. Honestly he confessed it.

(h) Then he saw a ray of hope. He heard God’s crucified King, Jesus, pray even for those who crucified him ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:33–34). If Christ would pray forgiveness for them, perhaps he would have mercy on him too.

(i) But he didn’t want only forgiveness. He had long been a rebel. He hated the corrupt human government of his day. But he had never before met a king like Jesus who loved even his enemies and prayed forgiveness for them. Now he found a respect and love for this king welling up in his heart. He wanted above all else to accept him as his own king, to be allowed to enter his eternal kingdom and to obey him for ever. ‘Lord, remember me’, he said, ‘when thou comest in thy kingdom.’ His conversion was complete.
(j) And the king not only forgave him, but assured him there and then of his immediate acceptance with God and of the guaranteed certainty of entry into God’s heaven: ‘Verily I say unto thee, “Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise.”’

Now in some respects this man’s case was extreme. But three passages from the Bible will help us to apply its lessons to ourselves. They are Isa 53:5–6 and Rom 5:10–11; 8:7–9. Look them up and read them to your class.

This story, then, has shown us how Christ can change a person’s heart and make him or her willing to obey him. But willingness to obey Christ is one thing; the ability to carry out his ethical commands is another. Christ is quite frank with us: in and of ourselves we do not have the power to carry out his commands. Here then is a story in which Jesus explains what must happen to us if we are to enter God’s kingdom and be able to live according to his ethical requirements.

**The conversion of a professor of theology**

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto you, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:1–18)

**Points to be noticed and emphasised**

1. The absolute necessity of being ‘born from above’ if ever we are to see or enter the kingdom of God (vv. 3, 5).

2. Nicodemus believed in God. He had undergone all the religious rites laid down in the Old Testament. He was the leading teacher of theology in Jerusalem at that
time. Yet he had not yet been ‘born from above’. He did not even understand the concept.

3. What then is this ‘being born from above’ and why is it necessary? Jesus answers these questions in verse 6: ‘that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit’.

Take an analogy. In the world around us there are different levels, or kinds, of life. There is vegetable life; above that, at a higher level, there is animal life; and above that, human life. A cabbage has vegetable life, a dog has animal life. Now if we feed a cabbage well, it will, grow into a big cabbage. But however well we cultivate it, it will never turn into a dog! To become a dog it would have to receive life from the higher, animal, level. Again, however well you feed and train a dog, it will never turn into a man and be able to play a musical instrument or read a book. To be able to do these human things it would have to receive a different kind of life from that which it already had: it would need to be ‘born from above’, from the higher level of human life.

So it is with us men and women. At our physical birth we received ‘human life’, because we were born of human parents—which is what Jesus means when he says: ‘that which is born of the flesh is flesh.’ But the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom. Its life is a higher kind of life than merely human life. It is the life of the Spirit of God. So if all we have is our merely human life, we would never see, that is understand, or enter the kingdom of God, any more than a dog could enjoy art or poetry, if all it had was animal life. It would never be able to play a piano—unless somehow it could be infused with human life. In the same way, to be able to enter the kingdom of God and to have the power to live according to its ethical requirements we must first receive the life of God’s Spirit.

4. How, then, and by what process do we get this life of God’s Spirit? The vital point to grasp is that it is a gift. We cannot earn it, or produce it ourselves. In that sense, it is like our physical life: none of us earned, merited or deserved our physical life. It was a gift, given us by God through our parents. Similarly when it comes to spiritual life: Jesus gives us spiritual life as a gift.

5. But what do we have to do to receive it? The simple answer is that we have to ‘believe on the Lord Jesus’ (John 4:15–16), or as the Bible puts it elsewhere, to receive him (John 1:12).

6. But what does it mean to believe on the Lord Jesus? Here study the analogy which Jesus himself used to help Nicodemus (John 3:14–16). First read the Story of Moses and the Serpent in the Wilderness (Num 21:4–9) and notice the main facts:

(a) The Israelites had sinned against God.
(b) They were bitten by poisonous snakes.
(c) They were dying, and were unable to save themselves.
(d) God in his mercy had Moses erect a serpent made of bronze on a pole.
(e) But that by itself would have saved nobody. If the Israelites wished to be saved from dying and to receive new life, they had to believe what God said and, as
their only hope, to look away from themselves to the serpent on the pole. When they so looked, God did the miracle and saved them: they lived.

Now apply the analogy to us and our situation:

(a) We have sinned against God.

(b) The poison of sin is destroying us; unless we are born from above and given new spiritual life, we shall ultimately perish.

(c) We cannot save ourselves.

(d) But God has sent his Son into the world to bear the penalty of our sins. He has been lifted up on the cross.

(e) We must admit that we deserve God’s judgment on our sin; and that Jesus is our only hope.

(f) And when we look away from ourselves to Jesus who died on the cross for us, and we put our faith solely in him, God does his great work of regeneration in our hearts and gives us the gift of eternal life.

Thus both the criminal on the cross and religious and upright Nicodemus entered the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus. It is also in this way that we enter the kingdom of God here and now as the spiritual children of God. And though at the beginning we are only spiritual babies we now have what we did not have before—the potential to develop and to learn to carry out God’s ethical requirements and to be loyal subjects of his kingdom. Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, later developed the courage to profess his allegiance to Christ publicly by asking the Roman Governor Pilate for the body of Jesus after the crucifixion (John 19:39).
In our last chapter we studied two key elements in the teaching of Jesus:

1. None of us has the power to carry out the ethical teaching of Jesus as it should be carried out unless we first receive the Spirit of God and are ‘born from above’.

2. Jesus is able and willing to give us the Spirit of God as a free gift and so to effect within us this ‘birth from above’.

But this brings us back to the question of the enforcement of ethics which we raised in Chapter 23: If Jesus can give people the power which they need to live according to his ethical standards, why does he not compel everyone to receive that power and so make the world a better place to live in? After all, according to the Bible, Jesus is the almighty Son of God. Can he not do anything he likes?

The answer is, first, that God can certainly do anything he likes, but there are some things that he does not like to do. And one of those things is turning human beings into machines which automatically carry out his commands without having any real choice. God has given his human creatures free will. At the physical level he has given us eyes; but also eyelids! We don’t have to look at the beauties of creation if we don’t want to.

Similarly at the moral and spiritual level. God commands us to love him with all our hearts; but he will never force us to love him against our will, since forced love is not love at all. In the same way, being ‘born from above’ depends, as we saw in our last chapter, on our trusting in Jesus and entering by faith into a heart-to-heart relationship with him. Such faith cannot be forced: it must be voluntary.

Granted then, somebody will say, that God cannot force people to believe in him, and love him. But surely he could use his almighty power to stop bad people from doing evil to others? He could, of course, if he wanted to. When he saw a man about to tell a lie, he could strike him dumb. But that would virtually remove the man’s free will: he could not disobey God even if he wanted to. Then again, if we all knew that the moment we told a lie we would immediately be struck dumb, few of us would actually tell a lie: we would be afraid of the penalty. But that would not necessarily change our hearts. Some footballers would happily commit a foul if they thought it would help them win the game. But they fear the referee would see them and immediately impose a penalty. So they refrain from committing a foul, but not
because they have realised that cheating, even in a game, is sin, and have repented of it. They are still cheats at heart.

Christ could, of course, strike people dead the moment they sinned. If he did, the whole human race would have been wiped out long ago and we should not be here today. But he doesn’t; and the Bible explains the reason: ‘God is patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance’ (2 Pet 3:9). ‘God, our Saviour, wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim 2:4).

And so when Jesus came the first time to set up the kingdom of God, the Bible makes it very plain that he did not come to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved (John 3:17). He therefore made no attempt to eliminate or destroy the wicked, as many people—even some of his disciples—had hoped he would. What he did is explained in the following parable.

### The Parable of the Sower

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the fowls came and devoured them up: some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: but other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear. . . . Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matt 13:3–9, 18–23)

**Read both the parable and its explanation and then make sure that your students can answer the following questions:**

1. **What process in real life answers to the sowing of the seed in the parable?**
2. **How many different reactions to the sowing were there? Wherein do they differ? What do they represent?**
3. **What, according to Jesus, are the chief things that keep people from truly receiving God’s word?**
Now we are ready to learn some further, very important lessons from this parable:

1. The life and all the potential for growth and fruit is in the seed.

   (a) This is true at the physical level. Soil can produce nothing until the life-carrying seed is put into it.

   (b) It is true at the spiritual level also. It is the Word of God that carries within it the life-creating, fruit-producing power.

   (c) Jesus said: ‘The words which I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life’ (John 6:63).

   (d) The Christian Apostle Peter says of his fellow Christians ‘you have been born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable through the living and enduring word of God’ (1 Pet 1:24).

2. We should

   (a) let the seed sink down into our hearts and not remain simply on the surface of our minds from which Satan can easily snatch it away.

   (b) ensure that nothing chokes the word so that it is never able to produce fruit.

3. Evidence should be visible in the lives of those who claim to have received Jesus’ word that it has begun to produce in their lives the fruit of God’s Spirit which is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control (Gal 5:22–23). An apple tree does not become an apple tree by bearing apples. But an apple tree that never bore any apples would be no use. A baby does not get life by crying; but if it really has life it will cry.

4. Finally, those who genuinely believe in Jesus and receive his word may expect on times to suffer distress and persecution (Mark 4:17); and they must be prepared to endure it.

   Now this last point is so important that we must think it through. First of all, it is true to experience. Believers in Jesus are not exempt from illness. More than that: they often suffer persecution which non-believers escape. But why does God allow it? Why does he not cure believers of all illnesses, protect them from all persecution, and give them total prosperity?

   Because faith and love must be tested and allowed to demonstrate that they are genuine. Let’s take some analogies.

   Suppose you are well-off, and whenever a certain man comes to see you, you are generous to him. The man, therefore, visits you frequently, says that he loves you and calls you his friend. Then suppose you lose all your wealth. You can no longer give the man anything. So he stops coming. Obviously he does not love you now. But the question is: did he ever really love you yourself for your own sake? And the answer is, No! He never did love you: he simply loved the gifts you gave.

   Or suppose a businessman claims that he believes in acting justly. And suppose he does act justly as long as he does not suffer for it. But then he realises that if he acts justly he will lose a million roubles. So he acts unjustly and keeps the roubles. Does this man really love and believe in justice? No!
The great Greek philosopher Plato held that no man could consider himself truly just unless he was prepared not only to receive no reward for acting justly, but to be persecuted for acting justly when he could, by acting unjustly, avoid persecution and receive reward.

Similarly, the Christian Apostle Peter explains to his fellow Christians why God allows them to suffer: ‘. . . now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine . . . ’ (1 Pet 1:6–7 NIV).

But someone may object: ‘Is it not unjust for evil men to persecute people simply because they believe in God and Jesus?’ Yes, it is horribly unjust! And God will one day punish them for it, if they do not repent (2 Thess 1:3–10). ‘But why does not God stop their persecution now at once? What right has he to call on Christians to endure it?’

Let the Apostle Peter explain:

For what glory is it, if when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. (1 Pet 2:20–25)

Here we reach the very heart of Christian ethics: Christians owe their salvation, forgiveness, eternal life and ultimate heaven to the fact that while they were still unrepentant sinners and hostile to God, Christ was willing to suffer and die for them that they might be brought to repentance, forgiven and reconciled to God. Thus Christians are called upon to put up with the suffering inflicted on them by evil men rather than cut off from them all chance of repentance by calling down on their heads God’s immediate judgment.

Jesus, of course, was no masochist perversely enjoying ill-treatment and suffering. He was no weakling either. He could have summoned twelve legions of angels to destroy his persecutors (Matt 27:52–54). Nor did he believe in a God who was so sentimental that he would never punish anyone. He, more frequently than anyone else in the Bible, warned people of the penalty and consequences that God must eventually inflict on them if they persisted in sin and did not repent. It was Jesus Christ who said: ‘If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’ (Mark 9:47–48). It was Jesus Christ who described the impenitent as being ‘thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matt 25:30). Moreover Jesus claimed that he will be the Judge at the Final Judgment (Matt 25:31–46). Harvest time will come (see the Parable of the Tares and the Wheat, Matt 13:24–43, and discuss it with your class or group).
Jesus was therefore not interested in simply teaching people ethics and telling them that they should be good. He was concerned to redeem, if possible, even the worst of sinners and by his death to provide a way of salvation for them. True Christians will follow his example. They cannot, of course, die for the sins of men in the way that Christ did. Only Christ could offer an atoning sacrifice for sins. But true Christians will feel impelled by the love and example of Christ to take the gospel of Christ to the world, and even to their persecutors, and to exemplify it by their behaviour, cost what suffering it may. Like Christ himself, they will not be content to preach ethics.
The Teacher’s Claims about Himself

A popular way of studying the ethical teaching of Jesus is to take his famous maxims and parables and concentrate on them without paying much attention to Jesus himself. After all, if one is teaching geometry, there is no need to begin by asking who invented or discovered its basic theorems. Knowing about the famous geometer Euclid’s life and character adds nothing to the cogency of the theorems which he enunciated. They stand, or fall, simply on the strength of their inherent logic. Why, people ask, should it not be the same with Jesus’ ethical teaching?

And then one is naturally attracted at first to Jesus’ maxims because not only are they self-evidently true to life, but they are phrased in direct, pithy, sometimes humorous, always vivid and often unforgettable language. Some of them were stunning reversals of the generally accepted norms of behaviour of the time: ‘love your enemies’, for instance, (instead of the normal ‘love your friends and hate your enemies’) and ‘the meek shall inherit the earth’ (whereas everybody thought it was the aggressive and the violent who were more likely to get power). Some of them, again, were lightning-flash exposures of moral inconsistency and hypocrisy: ‘they strain out [of their drink] a gnat and then swallow a camel’ (Matt 23:24), said of people who go to great lengths to avoid breaking some petty regulation and then without compunction flout the great fundamental principles of the moral law. Or consider the deliciously grotesque but effective exaggeration of ‘Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in you brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, Let me take the speck out of your eye, when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye’ (Matt 7:3–5). Or ponder the devastatingly obvious truth of this unanswerable reply to religious critics who complained that Jesus was mixing with and befriending morally unclean and sinful people: ‘The healthy do not need a doctor, but the sick do . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners’ (Matt 9:12–13).

Such memorable sayings certainly provide an understandably attractive introduction to Christian ethics. But when we proceed to study the ethics of Jesus as a coherent system we soon make a far-reaching discovery: one cannot isolate Jesus’ ethical teaching and study it simply as an ethical system without considering the person of Jesus himself. For everywhere one finds that Jesus is himself the king-pin of his whole ethical system, in the sense that if what he said about himself is not true, his
ethical system is invalidated and falls to pieces. Thus we are inevitably confronted with the deeper question: ‘Who, then, is this Jesus?’

So let us first list some examples of this feature of his ethics and then assess their implications.

1. **Jesus makes the ultimate criterion of true morality loyalty to himself personally**

Here are some sample statements:

   (a) ‘Blessed are you when men shall reproach you and persecute you . . . for my sake . . . Great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you’ (Matt 5:11–12).

   Particularly significant here is the comparison which Jesus draws between his disciples and the Old Testament prophets. The prophets were persecuted by their contemporaries for faithfully proclaiming the words of God. Christians are warned that they may be persecuted for faithfulness to Jesus. In this equation, then, the Christians are the counterparts of the prophets, Jesus is the counterpart of God!

   (b) ‘The person who loves father or mother . . . son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me’ (Matt 10:37).

   In other words a disciple’s supreme loyalty must be given to Jesus.

   (c) ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ (John 14:15).

   The motive for keeping Jesus’ commandments is love to Jesus personally.


   A disciple’s motivating power for caring for his fellow disciples is primarily love for Jesus.

   (e) ‘Everyone therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, him will I also deny before my Father . . .’ (Matt 10:32–33).

   In other words, people’s loyalty or disloyalty to Jesus in this life will determine what kind of reception they get in the next.

2. **Jesus declares that at the final judgment he himself will be the judge**

Any serious ethical system must be prepared to state what, if any, is the ultimate penalty for wrongdoing. Atheistic systems deny that there is any penalty beyond what a man may (or may not) suffer in this life. Millions, therefore, they admit, will never get justice either in this life or in any life to come. Jesus, as is to be expected, believed and taught that there will be a final judgment, when ultimate justice will be done to the living and the dead. But what is not always realised is that Jesus claimed that he will be the judge who tries each case, pronounces sentence, and imposes the penalties at that final judgment.
(a) ‘For neither does the Father judge any man, but he has given all judgment to the Son, that all may know the Son even as they honour the Father . . . and He [the Father] gave him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man’ (John 5:22–23, 27).

This announcement, incidentally, carries an important implication for the nature of the final judgment, namely that human beings will be judged by One who is, and forever remains, human himself; who knows what it is to be human; who during his life on earth was tempted as humans are tempted (Heb 4:15); whose merciful kindness, truth, justice and sinlessness have been demonstrated, not merely in some remote heaven, but in our broken and sinful world. We cannot stay to explore this point further here: our present task is simply to notice that Jesus made this claim. But just in case it might be thought that this quotation from John 5:22–23, 27 is an isolated text untypical of the rest of the New Testament, let us notice in passing that this claim that Jesus will be the final judge subsequently forms a central part of the apostles’ preaching. Peter, for instance, announces to a Gentile centurion, Cornelius: ‘And he [God] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he [Jesus] is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead’ (Acts 10:42). And Paul elsewhere declares to the philosophers of Athens that ‘God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed’ (Acts 17:31)—and Paul, of course, means Jesus.

(b) ‘Not every one who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say unto me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in thy name . . . and in thy name do many mighty works?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who work iniquity’ (Matt 7:21–22).

Here two things stand out. First, that religious activity, even when carried out in the name of Jesus, will not necessarily gain his approval at the judgment. And secondly, according to Jesus, the decisive consideration will be whether he ‘knows’ the person concerned or not. In contexts like this the verb ‘to know’ clearly does not mean ‘to know that someone exists or not’. It is a relational term, as for instance in the statement ‘I am the good shepherd and I know my own and my own know me’ (John 10:14). When at the last Jesus says to someone ‘I never knew you’, he is saying that he never had any personal relationship with that someone, or that someone with him. He never recognised him or her as one of his own. Thus, according to Jesus, the verdict at the judgment will turn on the question of the individual’s relationship with him.

3. Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins

Any serious system of ethics which regards people as responsible for their actions (and not as predeterined biological machines who cannot rightly be blamed for defects in their machinery nor for their resultant bad behaviour) must have some way of coming to terms with the fact that all people from time to time break the moral code and harm other people—and then wish they hadn’t. What can be done about it? Saying ‘sorry’ is good, but hardly enough by itself. If reparations are possible, they can be insisted on. But reparations are not always possible. Some way must, therefore, be provided of making forgiveness possible without implying that the breaking of the
moral code does not, in the end, matter, and that sin can be conveniently ignored. Naturally, in a system of ethics that holds that the ultimate authority behind the moral law is God, this need for forgiveness becomes paramount.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the possibility of forgiveness looms large in Jesus’ ethical teaching. The surprising thing is what he actually claimed.

(a) Jesus claimed to have personal authority to forgive mankind’s sins even against God

To see the full significance of this claim, we must study the startling effect it had on his contemporaries when they first heard it.

The Story of the Healing of the Paralytic

And it came to pass on a certain day, as he was teaching, that there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by, which were come out of every town of Galilee, and Judaea, and Jerusalem: and the power of the Lord was present to heal them. And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before him. And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the housetop, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone? But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts? Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house. And immediately he rose up before them, and took up that whereon he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. And they were all amazed, and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying, We have seen strange things to day.

(Luke 5:17–26)

Notice: 1) that there were present a number of Jewish experts in the Old Testament, who would have been familiar with its doctrine of forgiveness; 2) that when Jesus said to the paralysed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven’, these experts accused Jesus of what to them was the most serious sin a man can commit—blasphemy against God; 3) that this shows what they understood Jesus to be saying. He was not saying: ‘God forgives all who truly repent, and therefore we should all forgive one another, and I personally forgive you for any wrong thing you may have done against me.’ No, Jesus was claiming divine authority. ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ said the experts; and they meant it as a rhetorical question, carrying the unspoken answer, No one! And they were right: none but God has the authority to forgive sins against God. And therefore it raised with them, as it raises with us, the question: Who is this Jesus who claims for himself God’s own prerogative to forgive sins (see also Luke 7:49).

Moreover, Jesus would have clearly understood why the experts were accusing him of blasphemy. But he made no attempt to withdraw or modify his claim. Rather he did a miracle to demonstrate that he, the Son of Man, did have, even while he was still here on earth, divine authority to forgive mankind’s sins (5:24).
(b) The second surprising claim that Jesus made with regard to forgiveness is *Jesus claimed that his own death would lay the necessary legal basis for the just and honourable forgiveness of mankind’s sins against God.*

(i) ‘And he took a cup and gave thanks and gave to them, saying, All of you are to drink it. For this is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt 26:27–28).

(ii) ‘For truly the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45).

To these stupendous claims Jesus added two more:

4. **Jesus claimed that after his crucifixion, he would rise from the dead**

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

5. **Jesus claimed that after his resurrection and ascension he would come again**

   (a) ‘In my Father’s house are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you . . . I will come again and will receive you unto myself that where I am you may be also’ (John 14:2–3).

   (b) ‘Then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory’ (Luke 21:27).

Like all the others, claims 4 and 5 form an integral part of Jesus’ ethical system. As the Christian Apostle Paul was later to admit, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, his death cannot be regarded as the basis of mankind’s forgiveness (1 Cor 15:17); and without forgiveness Jesus’ ethical system is holed below the waterline. And if Jesus’ prophecy of his second coming is false, so is the concomitant declaration that at his second coming he will be mankind’s judge. And without that judgment Jesus’ ethical teaching loses its ultimate authority and credibility.
And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him. And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest’s, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be? In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled. And they that had laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest’s palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end. Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, and said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days. And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? What is it which these witness against thee? But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? Behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death. Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, saying, Prophesy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee? (Matt 26:47–68)

Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him. And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe, and said, Hail, King of the Jews! and they smote him with their hands. Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that
I find no fault in him. Then came Jesus, forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man! When the chief priests therefore and officers saw him, they cried out, saying, Crucify him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him. The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he was the more afraid; and went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, Whence art thou? But Jesus gave him no answer. Then saith Pilate unto him, Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Jesus answered, Thou coudest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin. And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar’s friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King! But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar. Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led him away. (John 19:1–16)

In our last chapter we saw that it is impossible to study the ethical teaching of Jesus seriously as a coherent whole without coming face to face with the stupendous claims which Jesus made about himself. We listed, therefore, some of those claims and promised ourselves that in this and the following chapters we would attempt to assess them.

A good place to begin that assessment is Jesus’ death, since there is no question about the historical fact that he was crucified by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. It is attested not only by the Christian New Testament but also by the very anti-Christian Roman historian, Tacitus (Annals XV.44). The question is: Why was he crucified? As we study the answers which the New Testament gives to this question, we shall find that they involve most of the claims of Jesus which presently concern us; and simultaneously they present powerful evidence that those claims are true.

**Why, then, was Jesus crucified?**

The New Testament gives two distinct, yet inter-related, sets of answers:

A. For reasons which we shall consider below the leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem engineered his death and persuaded the Roman Procurator, Pilate, to carry it out. (Note: not all Jews in Palestine were involved, and certainly not the majority of the Jewish nation, most of whom lived abroad and did not hear about the death of Jesus until afterwards.)

B. Jesus died of his own volition in obedience to God’s will, as he explained beforehand to his disciples: No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it again. This command I received from my Father’ (John 10:18).
The Jewish leaders’ case against Jesus

The case was, in essence, that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy in claiming to be equal with God, and therefore was rightly put to death according to the Old Testament law of Lev 24:16. Here are some leading instances.

1. Jesus claimed equality with the Creator: ‘And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day. But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God’ (John 5:16–18).

One Sabbath (the day that God commanded the Jews to take as a rest day [Exod 20:8–11]) Jesus found a man who had been paralysed for thirty-eight years and used his divine power to heal the man completely. The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath by engaging in the work of healing. But Jesus pointed out that, while according to the Genesis story God rested from his work of creation on the seventh day, God still is constantly at work upholding, developing and restoring his creation. We can see that ourselves. The healing mechanisms which God has placed in the human body, for instance, are not designed to switch off one day in seven! But Jesus’ claim was more than that: ‘My Father works and I work’, he said, bracketing himself with the Creator, and his work with the Creator’s work.

That, at least, is what the Jewish leaders understood him to be claiming, as we see from the narrative. Far from saying that they had misunderstood the implications of his claim, Jesus went on to make its details more explicit: he does everything which God does (v. 19); he is the source of all life, as God is (vv. 21, 26); he will be the final judge (vv. 22–27); he will raise the dead (vv. 28–29).

To the Jewish leaders this was extreme blasphemy and they tried to stone him, as indeed they had a duty to do according to the Old Testament law (Lev 24:16)—if, that is, what he claimed was not true.

2. Jesus claimed pre-existence: ‘The Jews therefore said to him, You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham? Verily, verily, I tell you, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am. At this they picked up stones to stone him’ (John 8:57–59).

It is important to notice that Jesus was not speaking as a reincarnationist. Such a person would have said: ‘Before Abraham was born, I was’, that is, ‘I lived on this earth once before, in the time before Abraham; I subsequently died, but now I have been re-incarnated.’ Jesus did not say that. He said, ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ That is to say he was claiming the same timelessly eternal existence as God has. Once more the Jews attempted to stone him; for to them what he said was not only nonsense but blasphemy.

3. Jesus claimed oneness with God: ‘My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one. Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him’ (John 10:27–30).
Here Jesus is claiming to have the same power as God. No one can pluck the sheep out of his hand any more than they could out of God’s hand. To have the same power as God, Jesus must be God, one in essence with God, though not in identity. Once more the Jews pick up stones to stone him, the appropriate punishment for what they regarded as sheer blasphemy.

The Jews’ ways of accounting for Jesus’ claims

1. Some said he was mad: ‘There arose a division again among the Jews because of these words. And many of them said, He has a demon and is mad’ (John 10:19–20).

Theoretically, of course, this is one way of accounting for Jesus’ claims (that is, if they were not true); for when people are basically unstable emotionally and mentally, then they can develop bizarre ideas in religion, as in any other subject. But other Jews gave the obvious answer: ‘these are not the sayings of one possessed with a demon’. For the words of Jesus have brought freedom from guilt and from fear, and peace, joy, love and hope to millions, and still do. All over the world savages who have received them have become civilised, and criminals have turned into law-abiding citizens. It is impossible to think that the one whose words have had such an effect was himself an unstable and dangerous madman.

2. Other Jews said he was a doctrinally wild, schismatic and heretic, a rebel against the orthodox Jewish faith: ‘The Jews answered him: “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan [to the Jews Samaritans were heretical] and demon-possessed”’ (John 8:48).

Jesus’ reply was: ‘I am not demon possessed, but I honour my Father’; and we today, after 2,000 years of history, are in a position to assess this claim that ‘he honoured his Father’. The Jew, Jesus, has brought multi-millions of pagan Gentiles to believe, not in just any God, but in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that is in the God of the Jews. No other Jew has ever done anything like it. True Christians assert with equal fervour as the Jews do, that ‘there is one God’ (1 Tim 2:5). Christians believe that God is a tri-unity; but they do not believe in three gods any more than Jews do. What sense would it make to say that Jesus was a dangerous Jewish heretic?

3. Still other Jews said that Jesus was in league with Satan himself: ‘… the Pharisees said, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons”’ (Matt 12:24).

From this it is clear that Jesus performed miracles of healing, that the Pharisees admitted that he did, and that the power by which he performed these miracles was supernatural. But they were unwilling to admit that this supernatural power was God’s power; for if it were, all Jesus’ claims about himself would be true. This drove them therefore to the only alternative explanation: his supernatural power must be satanic; Jesus was in league with the devil!

But the conclusion was, as Jesus pointed out, logically absurd: ‘for if Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then can his kingdom stand?’ Satan is scarcely in the business of destroying himself.
And then there is the moral argument, which the crowd raised on another occasion: ‘Can a demon [that is, a morally evil spirit] open the eyes of the blind?’ (John 10:21). If man is faced with a choice between God and Satan, and must distinguish between the two, he cannot decide by simply asking which power is superhuman: for both are. He must ask, Which superhuman power is good and which is bad? That brings home to us the seriousness of the moral choice that Jesus’ claims confront us with. If his claims are not true, his superhuman power must be satanic and evil. But seriously to class Jesus’ miracles as satanically evil, is morally perverse. We recognise modern medicine’s achievements in curing, where possible, diseases like blindness, paralysis and leprosy, as undeniably good. To say that when Jesus did these things they were satanically evil is to call white, black and to turn all moral judgment upside down. ‘If it is by Satan’s power that I cast out demons’, said Jesus, ‘by whom do your sons cast them out?’ (Matt 12:27).

The culmination of all this came at the trial of Jesus. At the preliminary investigation before the high priest, Caiaphas, Jesus remained silent in the face of many false accusations. Finally the exasperated high priest put him on oath: ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes it is as you say’, Jesus replied. (Matt 26:63–64). Upon this the high priest tore his robes, and said, ‘He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?’ They answered, ‘He deserves death.’ When the Jewish leaders subsequently brought Jesus to be tried by the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate they first advanced as their prime charge against Jesus that he was involved in political treason against the Roman Emperor (and we shall consider this in the next chapter). But Pilate’s considered verdict was: ‘As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.’ Thwarted at this level, the Jewish leaders then substituted this other charge: ‘We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God’ (John 19:6–7).

The Jews’ reaction: a lesson for us

The Jews are to be commended that they at least took the claims of Jesus seriously. In this they are a lesson for us. Nowadays it is possible to hear people say: ‘I can’t and don’t believe that Jesus was the Son of God; but I do believe that he was a very good man and an excellent teacher of ethics.’ But to talk like that is silly! If Jesus deliberately claimed to be the Son of God when he wasn’t, then the last thing you can say about him is that he was a good man. He was in that case, as the Jews maintained, a deliberate blasphemer and worthy of death. And his teaching of ethics would aggravate his crime, not lessen it. Deliberately to deceive people into believing that he was equal with God, while all the time pretending to urge on them the absolute importance of telling the truth, would have been the mark of a most despicable charlatan. If Jesus was not God incarnate, he was the worst possible of all ethical teachers.
Suggestions for discussion:

1. Try to imagine the courtroom scene and ask members of the class to think why the court condemned Jesus for blasphemy.

2. Discuss the proposition: ‘It is impossible to take the ethics of Jesus seriously without considering his claim to be the Son of God.’

3. Discuss the proposition: ‘There is strong moral evidence to support Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God.’
In the previous chapter we began to investigate the answers given in the New Testament to the question: Why was Jesus crucified? We saw that the principal charge made against him by the Jewish leaders was that of blasphemy because he claimed to be the Son of God. In this chapter we shall consider the other major charge they made against Jesus, then some details of Jesus’ trial before the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate and finally the reaction of the early disciples to Jesus’ death.

The second major charge had to do with

**Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah**

The background to this charge was the fact that in the Old Testament God through the prophets promised that one day he would send a great deliverer to liberate the Jewish nation from all their troubles and enemies and bring them complete salvation. This great deliverer came to be called the Messiah (derived from the Hebrew mashiach which means ‘anointed’. Christ is the Greek translation of this name).

At the time of Jesus some sections of the people thought of this promised Messiah as a political figure who would call the nation to arms and with God’s help drive out the hated Roman imperialists. From time to time, indeed, men had arisen claiming to be the Messiah and had led their followers in disastrous rebellions against the Romans. Two such people, Theudas and Judas the Galilean, are mentioned in Acts 5:36–37 (see also Acts 21:38 for another example of a similar thing at a later date).

Now Jesus certainly claimed to be the Messiah, and when challenged at his trial by the Jewish authorities, he openly confessed his claim (see Matt 26:63 and Luke 22:66). But never once did Jesus represent himself as a political leader. On one occasion, seeing the crowd about to try to make him king by force, he deliberately withdrew (John 6:15). Challenged publicly as to whether it was right for Jews to pay taxes to Caesar, he unhesitantly told the people that they must pay the taxes (Luke 20:19–26). Many times he had forewarned his disciples that God’s will for him was that he should be crucified (as for instance Matt 16:21–23). And when the troops came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and one of his disciples drew a sword in order to defend him, he rebuked that disciple and forbade him to use it (Matt 26:47–56).
Nevertheless, the Jewish high priest, sincerely or otherwise, persuaded himself and his colleagues that Jesus was another of these false political messiahs, who would, if left alone, raise a nationwide insurrection against the Romans which would result in the nation’s complete destruction (see John 11:47–53). So they accused him before Pilate of claiming to be the King of the Jews in a political sense and of fomenting rebellion against the Roman government. On these grounds they demanded his crucifixion.

**Some details from Jesus’ trial before Pilate**

Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me: what hast thou done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all. But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you the King of the Jews? Then cried they all again, saying, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. (John 18:35–40)

And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King. And Pilate asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answered him and said, Thou sayest it. Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accusethim: No, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him. I will therefore chastise him, and release him. (For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.) And they cried out all at once, saying, Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas: (who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.) Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. But they cried, saying, Crucify him, crucify him. And he said unto them the third time, Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him,
and let him go. And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required. And he released unto them him that for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired; but he delivered Jesus to their will. (Luke 23:1–25)

And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar’s friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha. And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King! But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar. (John 19:12–15)

Study the above passages in detail with your class and then get them to answer the following questions:

1. How did Jesus prove to Pilate that he was not an earthly political king?
2. What kind of a king did Jesus say he was and what kind of a kingdom had he come to set up?
3. Left to themselves what verdict did Herod and Pilate come to about Jesus?
4. By what arguments and means did the Jewish leaders force Pilate to crucify Jesus?
5. Read again John 18:38–40 and Luke 23:18–25. Do you see any significance in the fact that having accused Jesus of stirring up insurrection, the priests chose Barabbas rather than Jesus?
6. Comment on the suggestion: ‘all of us from time to time in life are faced with the choice, Jesus or Barabbas. To reject Jesus the Prince of Truth and Life is to choose Barabbas the murderer.’

A detail from the crucifixion

Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. (Matt 27:38–43)

So the Jewish leaders managed to get Pilate to crucify Jesus; and, as we see from the passage just quoted, they thought that his death finally proved that all his claims were false. How could he be the Messiah and save Israel if he could not save himself from arrest, crucifixion and death? If he really was God’s Son, God would not allow him to
die such an excruciating and ignominious death. But Jesus did die. The Jewish leaders
felt that at last they had triumphed and had put an end to Jesus and his influence for
ever.

But three days after his burial a report went round Jerusalem that his tomb was
discovered to be empty (Matt 27:62–28:15). Within less than eight weeks more than
three thousand people had come to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead (Acts
2:41) and they became his disciples—which is more than had ever believed on him
before he died. And since then, of course, the number has multiplied into millions.

The early Christians’ attitude to Jesus’ death

Now the historical evidence that Jesus did actually rise from the dead will be dealt
with in future chapters. What interests us here is the attitude of these thousands of
new converts to Jesus’ death. They did not regard it as a disaster, nor even as an
unfortunate happening that had been remedied by the resurrection. For them it was
the most important and significant thing that Jesus ever did. What is more, they
immediately began the custom of meeting together regularly at least once a week
(generally on the first day of the week, the day Christ rose from the dead) on purpose
to remember and celebrate Jesus’ death. The simple ceremony by which they did this
was called ‘the breaking of bread’ (Acts 2:42; 20:7) or ‘the Lord’s supper’. Here is a
description of it given by the Christian Apostle Paul.

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord
Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: and when he had given
thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this
do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had
supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye
drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye
do shew the Lord’s death till he come. (1 Cor 11:23–26)

This ceremony, Paul reminds us, was instituted by Jesus himself the night before
he died. It is, then, Jesus’ own chosen way of being remembered.

Jesus’ own chosen way of being remembered

It is obvious that in instituting this ceremony, Jesus foresaw that its constant repetition
all down the centuries would emphasise what he regarded as the most important
feature of his work here on earth. He could, of course, have directed that once a week,
when his disciples met together, one of them should publicly recite Jesus’ Sermon on
the Mount. The effect of this would have been to stress Jesus’ role as a teacher of
ethics. But he did not choose this way of being remembered. He could, alternatively,
have directed that someone should stand up and publicly read an account of his
outstanding miracles. This would have suggested that Jesus’ chief function was that of
a miracle worker. He did not choose this way either. He chose a ceremony that by its
very form would recall his death. And not merely the fact of his death, but the
purpose of it: the giving of his body to the sufferings and death of the cross and the
pouring out of his blood for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 27:28).
If this, then, was the purpose of his death, it is understandable that he should insist on placing his death at the centre of his people’s memory, and indeed, of the world’s attention. His ethical teaching could not have procured forgiveness for mankind, nor could his miracles. Indeed the effect (healthy enough in itself) of his ethical teaching would be to make people more aware of their sins, and therefore of their guilt, than ever before. Only his death as a divinely-appointed sacrifice for sin could procure the necessary forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

Moreover, Jesus carefully laid down the details for this remembrance ceremony in order to make clear whose death and whose sacrifice it was that would procure forgiveness. When he handed his disciples the bread as a symbol of his body, he did not tell them to offer this symbol to God as a way of obtaining forgiveness: he told them to eat it. Similarly when he handed them the cup of wine as a symbol of his blood, he did not tell them to pour it out as a sacrifice for sin. They were to drink it (Matt 26:26–27). There was no salvation in the symbols: they were to be simply the means of remembering and proclaiming Jesus’ death, as the centre-point of history, to all successive generations. It was to be clearly seen and understood, then, that the salvation of the world depended on nothing that mankind could so, or suffer, or sacrifice, but solely on the sacrifice that Jesus made when he died on the cross.

In our next chapter we must turn to the task of assessing this stupendous claim.
Jesus the Teacher (13)

Jesus’ Death (III)

In the last chapter we saw how Jesus before he died made it clear that the salvation of the world depended solely on the sacrifice he was to make through his death on the cross. This claim is so stupendous that we naturally ask what kind of evidence there is that it is true. Let us call first then on

I. The testimony of John the Baptist

John the Baptist identified himself as the divinely appointed fore-runner of the Messiah whose task it was officially and publicly to introduce the Messiah to his nation and to the world (see Isa 40:3–5; John 1:23). Accordingly, when he introduced Jesus at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, John naturally declared who Jesus was: the Son of God (John 1:30–34). But in addition he declared what Jesus had come to do: ‘Behold’, said John, ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29).

The significant thing is that this announcement was first made, not after Jesus had died, nor even at the end of his life on earth; it was made at the very beginning of his ministry. Right from the start it was announced that Jesus had come to die for the sins of the world. And Jesus himself subsequently repeated the claim: ‘For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many’ (Mark 10:45), and ‘I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . I lay down my life for the sheep’ (John 10:11, 15). In this, of course, Jesus is unique. No other world teacher, not the Buddha, not Mohammed, not Socrates or Plato, not Napoleon, not Marx, nor any other philosopher, politician or founder of religion has ever announced at the start of his career that his main purpose in life was to die for the sins of the world.

And there are good reasons for this. If the claim were not true, then only a mentally deranged megalomaniac would make it. Only someone who was infinitely more than one finite human being could possibly offer himself as an adequate sacrifice for the sin of the whole world. And only a man who was himself sinless, and therefore not worthy of death himself, could offer his own death as a substitute for the death of sinners. It is understandable therefore that no other religious leader has ever made any such claim.
Yet Jesus made it. Then was he mad? Perhaps the only appropriate answer to such a question is to say that if Jesus of Nazareth was mad, then by that standard no one in the whole course of world history has ever been sane.

II. The witness of the Old Testament

According to the New Testament, the Christian gospel is not simply that ‘Christ died for our sins’, but rather that ‘Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures’ (that is, the Old Testament, see 1 Cor 15:3). In other words the New Testament claims that Jesus’ death was the fulfilment of the promises and prophecies which God had made centuries before. In those prophecies God had indicated that he would send his great servant, the Messiah, into the world to pay the penalty of sin and die in order that sinners might be forgiven and reconciled to God. This is, of course, what Jesus himself claimed both before his death and after his resurrection:

He [Jesus] said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures . . .

Thus it is written that the Messiah should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name among all the nations . . . (Luke 24:44–47)

So the idea that God’s great servant, the Messiah, would suffer and die for the sins of the world was no new idea, unheard-of until Jesus suddenly sprang it on his contemporaries. Centuries earlier God had had it clearly announced and written down in the Old Testament. The only question for Jesus’ contemporaries was: did Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection match these Old Testament prophecies? The Jewish leaders were so sure that he was not the Messiah, that seemingly forgetting what their prophets had said, they put him to death—which is the last thing they ought to have done if they were trying to prove that he was not the Messiah.

But the same question remains for us as we make up our minds about the claims of Jesus.

So here is a project that you can do with your class. The following is one of the most famous passages in the Old Testament (written, according to biblical scholars, more than 600 years before the time of Christ) that predicted what would happen to God’s servant, the Messiah, when God sent him into the world.

Behold, my servant shall deal wisely, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Like as many were astonished at thee, (his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men,) so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they understand. Who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, yet he humbled himself and opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb; yea, he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who among them considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living? for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And they made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; although he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many: and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors: yet he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa 52:13–53:12)

1. Read and study this passage, noting its detail very carefully.

2. Take a New Testament and read its four accounts of the death of Jesus. They can be found at the end of the four biographies of Jesus (called ‘Gospels’) by the Apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with which the New Testament begins.

3. Compare what happened to Jesus with the predictions of Isaiah 53.

4. Then decide for yourselves how strong the evidence is that when Jesus died for our sins, he died for our sins, according to the Scriptures’ (1 Cor 15:3).

5. Re-read the prophecy and make sure the class has understood the two most important points it makes.

(a) God’s servant was not only to suffer rejection, torture, and death at the hands of his fellow men, and to do so without retaliation. He was to suffer at God’s hands as well. The Lord was to lay on him ‘the iniquity of us all’ (v. 6), and thus make him answerable for it. The Lord would then ‘make his soul an offering for sin’ (v. 10). That would mean that God would treat him as our substitute. He would be wounded and bruised for our transgressions and iniquities (v. 5). The Lord himself would bruise him, put him to grief (v. 10) and chastise him (v. 5), so that he might suffer the penalty of God’s law against sin instead of us. He was to ‘be numbered with the transgressors’ and so ‘make intercession for the transgressors’ (v. 12). The result would be that we could be ‘justified’, that is, be forgiven and acquitted before God’s judgment bar (v. 11), and have peace with God (v. 3).
(b) God’s servant would die (v. 11) and be buried (v. 9). But after that (v. 10) he would prolong his days, God’s will would then prosper in his hand (v. 10) and he would triumph and be greatly exalted (v. 10, 11 and 52:13–15) and universally acknowledged. The only way this could happen would be by the resurrection of God’s servant from the dead.

A possible objection. Now someone may be tempted to argue: Since this prophecy was written long before Jesus was born and he would have known all about it, would it not have been easy for him to provoke the Jewish authorities to put him to death, and to make a martyr of himself, and so persuade his followers that he was the fulfilment of this prophecy? Such an argument may sound superficially attractive but it meets an insuperable objection: if Jesus set himself to fulfil this prophecy, he had to be sure that, after he was executed, he would rise from the dead. If he did not rise, his claim would be shown to be bogus. Which is why, of course, no one else but Jesus ever announced that he was going to fulfil the prophecy. That then brings us back to the question: What is the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection? And we are to deal with it in our next chapter.

III. The testimony of personal experience

Let us begin with an analogy. The world is so made that we all find ourselves with stomachs that get hungry and drive us to look for food. It would be odd indeed if the world nowhere contained any food to satisfy that hunger. But how do we know that a loaf of bread, say, is good and genuine food and not a cheat? We know it by eating it and finding that it perfectly satisfies our hunger.

In the same way we all find ourselves with a conscience. We did not invent it. It witnesses to us that we have sinned against God and our fellow men, and deserve to suffer the penalty of our sin. We inwardly crave forgiveness. But where can we find forgiveness consistent with universal justice? It is just here that Jesus offers himself to us. He says he is our Maker and our Judge: he must and does uphold God’s law and condemn our sins. Their penalty must be paid. But he is not only our Judge. Because he is our Creator, he loves us his creatures as only a Creator could. And because he loves us, he was prepared to die for us to pay our penalty and to give us in its place his peace and eternal life. But how do we know that it, or rather he, is true? By believing and receiving him and discovering that he meets, as no one else can, the need of our conscience.

Ultimately it comes down to the question: if there is a Creator God, how would I recognise him? The Bible’s answer is: you would recognise your Creator by the fact that, though you are a sinner, he would do anything, consistent with righteousness, however extreme, rather than let you perish. To put it in the Bible’s own words: ‘God commends his love to us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life’ (Rom 5:8; John 3:16).
The Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ (I)

I. The resurrection of Christ: the keystone of Christianity

Begin this lesson by explaining to your students what a keystone in an arch is. If need be, draw it for them on a blackboard. Point out that if the keystone is removed from an arch, the arch will collapse. The whole existence of the arch depends on the keystone.

In the same way, the whole of Christianity depends on the resurrection of Christ. If the resurrection did not happen; if the New Testament’s records of it could be proved untrue, then the whole of Christianity would collapse. Nothing worthwhile could be salvaged from it.

We can see that ourselves, if we read the New Testament and observe how central the resurrection is to its preaching and teaching. But what is more significant is that the early Christians themselves were aware that if the resurrection of Christ was not a fact, then there was nothing in Christianity worth having. Take, for example, the Apostle Paul. Writing to his converts in Corinth he says: ‘If Christ has not been raised, you faith is futile; you are still in your sins’ (1 Cor 15:17).

It is easy to see why this is so. Central to Christianity is the gospel. The gospel, says the Bible (Rom 1:16), is the power of God unto salvation. But how does it work? By offering and effecting forgiveness of sins, reconciliation and peace with God, through the death of Christ on the cross. But the death of a mere man could not make atonement for the sins of the world. Only one who was the Son of God could do that. Now Jesus predicted not only that he would die for our sins, but also that he would rise again. His resurrection would finally prove he was the Son of God. But suppose Jesus did not in fact rise from the dead. His prediction would then be shown to be fake. We could no longer believe he was the Son of God. We should then have to regard his death as simply one more cruel death such as many men have suffered. In that case Jesus’ death could not procure forgiveness of sins for mankind any more than any other man’s death. Christianity would be left with no gospel to preach.

Again, Paul says about himself and the other Christian apostles and preachers:

And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised. (1 Cor 15:14–16)

Here Paul tells us bluntly that if it were not true that Christ rose from the dead, he, Paul, and the other apostles would be convicted of being deliberate and despicable.
liars. For at the heart of their Christian gospel was their insistence that God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead, and that they had personally met, seen and spoken to him after his resurrection. How could anyone respect, let alone have faith in, Christianity, if its first propagators were a bunch of deliberate liars?

Some people suggest that if Paul were living today he would not insist on Christ’s literal and physical resurrection, for he would know that many modern scientists and philosophers hold the theory that physical resurrection is impossible. But this suggestion is false. In the passage cited above Paul tells us that many philosophers and scientists in his own day held a similar theory that resurrection (of anyone at all) is simply impossible. Paul was fully aware of their theory. But he held that the sheer historical occurrence of Christ’s resurrection, witnessed by many responsible eyewitnesses, himself included, outweighed—and in fact destroyed—the mere theory of the contemporary philosophers and scientists. But if, knowing all about the scientists’ theories, Paul and his fellow apostles had deliberately concocted a story of Christ’s resurrection, aware in their own hearts that they had not seen, handled and talked to the risen Christ, and that it was simply a myth which they themselves had fabricated; then they were nothing but religious hoaxers, worthy of contempt. And the Christian gospel would stand in ruins.

In light of this, it becomes important to know who it was that first told the world that three days after his burial, Christ’s tomb was found to be empty.

II. The Christians were not the first people to tell the world that the tomb of Jesus was empty

Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch. . . . Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governors ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. (Matt 27:62–66; 28:11–15)

From this passage we see that it was the Jewish authorities who first let it be known that Christ’s tomb was empty. The Christians as yet said nothing to anybody (except among themselves); and it was to be another fifty days before, on the Day of Pentecost, they publicly proclaimed that Jesus had risen from the dead (see Acts 1 and 2).

Why then did the Jews forestall the Christians and announce the fact that the tomb was empty? Because it was a fact! And, as Matthew tells us, they had strong reasons for
not trying to cover up the fact: what would Pilate have said if fifty days later he had discovered that the Jewish authorities had been involved in a cover-up? And they had urgent reasons for getting their explanation of the fact across to the public and gaining credence for it at once, if possible. For they knew that the Christians would presently claim the empty tomb as evidence that Jesus had risen from the dead. They felt they must forestall the Christians: the first explanation on the market, would, they hoped, gain the most credence.

Now the Jewish authorities’ explanation of the fact is self-evidently untrue. It is impossible to believe it. But that still leaves the fact of the empty tomb. How shall it be explained?

An exercise:

Ask your students to pick out those features of the Jewish explanation that make it incredible. Some hints:

1. It was a serious offence for soldiers to sleep on guard duty. Is it likely that they would all have fallen asleep?

2. How could the disciples have broken the seal on the tomb and rolled away the massive stone without the noise waking up the soldiers, if they were asleep?

3. If the soldiers remained asleep until the body was removed, and made no attempt to arrest the removers, how could they have seen who the removers were?

III. Why it is that the records of the resurrection were all written by Christians?

Would it not be more convincing, some people say, if some of the records of the resurrection were written by non-Christians? At least, they would not be biased and prejudiced; and therefore their independent witness would be more impressive.

Perhaps so. But there are the following considerations. First of all, in those early days people who became convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead, became Christians. It would be difficult indeed to find someone who was convinced of Christ’s resurrection and yet did not become a Christian and so was able to give an ‘unbiased’ record of the evidence for the resurrection. The important thing to notice about the thousands who in those early days became Christians is that they were not Christians when they first heard the claim that Jesus was risen from the dead. It was the force of the evidence of his resurrection that converted them.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is a case in point.

And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou
me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men which journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. (Acts 9:1–9)

The case of Saul of Tarsus is special in many ways. But it is clear from the narrative that he was not only not a Christian: he was a positive and violent opponent of Christianity, and was out to destroy what he regarded as the fraudulent story of Christ’s resurrection. But then the risen Christ appeared to him on the Damascus road. It was the reality of the risen Christ that converted him.

One cannot deny the historicity of his conversion. It was he who as the Apostle Paul did more than any other by his missionary travels, preaching and writings to establish Christianity in Asia and Europe. It was his writings that later transformed Europe at the time of the Reformation. And still to this day his writings exercise an enormous influence over millions of people. One cannot, therefore, ignore Paul’s conversion, its effects have been so vast and so enduring. What, then, caused his conversion? He says that it was a personal encounter with Jesus after he rose from the dead; and, not surprisingly, his subsequent sermons and writings are full of the reality, the wonder, and the glorious implications of Christ’s resurrection. If that resurrection was not in fact a reality, what other adequate cause can we posit for Paul’s conversion?

But to get back to the question: why are there no records from the non-Christian contemporaries of the early Christians in support of the claim that Jesus rose from the dead? That question, as we have now seen, is rather unhelpful. A better question would be: where is the evidence from the contemporary opponents of Christianity that Christ had not risen from the dead? Many people at the time, of course, when they heard the Christians say that Christ was risen, immediately dismissed it from their minds as nonsense. Many still do. But the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem could not afford to do so. They had instigated his judicial murder; and in the first few weeks after Pentecost, when the Christians were daily proclaiming in the temple that Jesus was risen from the dead, and some few thousands in Jerusalem, including many priests, were getting converted, the authorities understandably made strenuous efforts to strangle Christianity at its birth (see Acts of the Apostles 2–9). They put the Christian apostles on trial, beat and imprisoned them, and tried (unsuccessfully) to suppress all preaching in the name of Jesus.

Then why did they not, in those first few weeks, do the one thing that would have stopped Christianity dead in its tracks? Why did they not produce the dead body of Jesus and put it on public display? They had all the panoply of State, including torture and help from the Roman Governor, available to them to track down the body of Jesus if the Christians had, in fact, surreptitiously removed it. Why, then did they not produce the body?
‘Because’, said the Christians, ‘they couldn’t. The body was gone. Jesus had in actual fact been raised from the dead.’

Now the absence of this particular piece of negative evidence is surely significant. But in addition we must next ask: what kind of positive evidence did the first Christians put forward for the resurrection? To that question we shall turn in our next chapter.
The Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ (II)

In this chapter we shall begin to consider examples of the various kinds of evidence that the early Christians offer us for the resurrection of Christ.

I. Physical evidence

We first consider evidence from one of Christ’s disciples, John. He says that when he first heard that the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb, he went at once to examine the situation. He found that though the body was indeed gone, the tomb was not completely empty: the grave clothes in which Jesus had been buried were still there. Furthermore, there was something about the positioning and state of the grave clothes that convinced him that the only satisfactory explanation of what he saw was that a miracle had taken place and Jesus had risen.

Now, many of your students will have read detective stories. So invite them to use their detective skills on the evidence that John gives us. But first let us assess the reliability of John as a witness.

1. The reliability of John as a witness

The question is: can we be sure that in reporting what he saw, John is being honest and not deliberately telling untruths? So let us ask: What motive would he have had for lying? He himself reports that on the evening of the day in which he found the tomb empty, he and his fellow disciples met in a room that was bolted for fear of the Jews (John 20:19). A few weeks later he was twice imprisoned and then beaten by the authorities for publicly preaching that Jesus was risen from the dead (Acts 4:1–21; 5:17–42). Then his fellow Christian, Stephen, was stoned to death (Acts 6:8–7:60). Later his own brother, James, was executed by King Herod for the same reason; and so severe was the general persecution that many Christians were obliged to flee for their lives from Jerusalem (Acts 12:1–2; 11:19). During the subsequent persecution by the Emperor Nero, many Christians suffered horrible deaths. And in his old age John himself was exiled on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9). Are we to think, therefore, that having convinced many people of the resurrection of Jesus by telling lies about what he saw in the tomb, he was prepared to stand by and see them persecuted and executed for the sake of these lies which he had concocted; and then himself suffer imprisonment, fear of death, and exile for what he knew to be a lie?

Moreover a few pages earlier in his book (John 18:37) he records Christ’s words before Pilate: ‘To this end have I been born, and to this end am I come into the world, that I should be witness to the truth. Everyone that is of the truth hears my voice.’ Is it
likely that shortly after writing this, he deliberately falsified the record of what he saw in the tomb in order to bolster the claim of Jesus to be witness to the truth? If he did, he was a most despicable religious charlatan. But religious charlatans don’t write books of moral power and spiritual beauty like the Gospel of John. You may think John was mistaken or self-deceived over what he saw in the tomb; but it is impossible to think that he is as deliberate liar.

So let us now investigate (a) what he tells us about the way Jesus was buried; (b) what he saw in the tomb on the third day after the burial; and (c) what he deduced from what he saw. Then we shall be in a position to make up our own minds.

2. The way Jesus was buried

And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand. (John 19:38–42)

From these verses and from John 20:1 (and from Luke 23:53) we learn that Jesus was buried not in a grave dug in the earth, but in a tomb hewn out of the rock face. The entrance to the tomb and the space inside were big enough, we learn (19:40, 42 and 20:6–8), for at least two adult people to enter, in addition to the corpse. The dead body would not have been laid on the ground but on a shelf hewn out of the wall of the tomb. The mixture of myrrh and aloes which Nicodemus brought would have weighed at least 25 kg. This is not an exaggerated, fairy tale figure, but usual for the burial of an honoured and valued personage in the ancient Middle East. (About 35 kg of spices were used by a certain Onkeles at the funeral of the Rabbi Gamaliel a little later in the first century AD.) Both the myrrh (a fragrant resin) and the aloes (a powder of aromatic sandalwood) would have been used in powdered form. The body of Jesus was wrapped in strips of linen cloth, interlarded with the spices. The head (see 20:7) was bound round with a large face-cloth which, running beneath the jaw and then over the top of the head and round the front and back of the head, would have kept the jaw from falling open. The body would then be laid on the stone bench, at one end of which there would have been a shallow step to act as a cushion for the head.

3. What John, and Peter, saw in the tomb

The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre. Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him. Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen
clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, and the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. (John 20:1–9)

It is clear that Peter, John and Mary Magdalene, in spite of all that Jesus had told them, were not expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. Otherwise, they would have been at the tomb to see it happen; and on finding the tomb empty, Mary would not have reported the fact to John in the words: ‘They [some unknown persons] have taken away the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they have placed him.’ And even when Peter and John heard Mary’s report, they still did not tumble to the fact that the Lord had risen from the dead, and explain it all to Mary. They simply ran to investigate what had happened. Grave robbing was a common practice at the time (the Roman Emperor Claudius, AD 41–54, issued a decree—a copy of which, engraved on stone, has been found in Palestine—forbidding it on pain of death). It could, for all Peter and John expected, have been that grave-robbers had removed the large stone that would have been used to cover the entrance of the tomb once the body had been placed inside, and had stolen the body in the hope of finding jewellery and other small valuable items buried with it (not to speak of the large amount of very expensive spices bound up with the extensive—and valuable—linen cloths).

Now when John first arrived at the tomb, he tells us that he did not go in, but peeped in from the outside. From that position the thing that immediately caught his eye was that, though the body was gone, the grave clothes were still there. The next thing that struck him forcibly (he mentions it twice, in v. 5 and again in v. 6) was that the grave clothes, that is the linen cloths, were not only there: they were lying there. That is, they were not in a heap, they were not thrown all round the tomb (as they might have been if robbers had hastily torn them off the body); they were lying there still on the shelf just as they had been when the body was inside them, but flattened somewhat now that the body was gone.

Then Peter caught up with John, and in his characteristically impetuous manner (notice how unconstrainedly true to life the narrative is) entered the tomb, and John with him. Now they could both see, what from outside the tomb John could not see, the position of the face-cloth that had been round the Lord’s head.

The immediately noticeable thing was that it was not lying with the linen clothes. It was twirled round upon itself just as it had been when it had been on the Lord’s head; and it was lying by itself in a distinct place, presumably on the shallow step that had served as a cushion for the Lord’s head.

4. What John deduced from what he saw

He saw and believed, says the narrative. Believed what? Not simply believed what Mary had told them about the body being missing. It would not have taken the presence, position and state of the linen cloths and the face-cloth to confirm Mary’s story. John could just as easily have seen that the body had gone, if the grave-cloths had gone as well. Nor, so he tells us, did what he saw remind him of Old Testament
Scriptures that indicated that the Messiah must rise from the dead, and so lead him to conclude that these Scriptures must have been fulfilled. At the time, he says, neither he nor Peter had realised that the Old Testament prophesied that Messiah must rise again. And what is more, he had not yet met the risen Lord, and did not do so until the evening of that day.

What he deduced from the presence, position, and state of the linen cloths and the face-cloth was that the body of Jesus had come through the grave clothes without unwrapping them, and had left them largely undisturbed, though somewhat collapsed. In other words a miracle had taken place. Christ’s body had somehow gone and left the grave clothes behind. A resurrection, whatever that might turn out to mean, had taken place.

5. The reasonableness of John’s belief

(a) We can say at once that what John saw shows conclusively that the body had not been removed by grave-robbers. They would not have taken the body and left the grave clothes and spices which were worth more than a dead body. And had they undone all the linen cloths and the face-cloth in order to get the body out, they would not have delayed in order to put the cloths back again just as they were before the body was taken; not when there was a posse of soldiers on guard outside, liable any moment to inspect the tomb (see Matt 27:62–66).

(b) But suppose the impossible, that someone, friendly to Jesus, had managed under the very noses of the soldiers to break the seal on the tomb and roll away the stone, intent on removing Jesus’ body for religious or sentimental reasons. It is conceivable that they would have removed the grave clothes from the body so as not so easily to be seen to be carrying a dead body through the streets. It is also conceivable that they might have put the grave clothes back to make it look to the soldiers on a casual inspection as though the body was still there. But they would not have left the stone rolled away and the tomb wide open! And we know from Matthew that when the soldiers did look into the tomb, they were not deceived into thinking that the body was still there (Matt 28:11–15). But all this unlikely speculation founders on the fact that if anyone friendly to Jesus had removed the body and buried it elsewhere for safekeeping, they would eventually have told the other disciples where it was.

(c) So next suppose that someone had taken the body away and deliberately arranged the grave clothes to make it look as if a miracle had taken place. Who would that someone have been? The authorities in Jerusalem would certainly not have done any such thing. And, for reasons which we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, neither John, nor any other of the early Christians, would have perpetrated such a deceit; nor could have done with a posse of soldiers on guard.

6. Final conclusion

What John and Peter saw, then, when they went to the tomb early on the first day of the week, constitutes a powerful piece of physical evidence for the resurrection of Christ. And there was more to follow. In the evening of that same day Christ...
appeared to his disciples in the upper room, showed them his hands and his side (John 20:30); got them to handle him to see that he was not a disembodied spirit, but a body with flesh and bone; and called for food and ate it in their presence (Luke 24:36–43), and continued to appear to them in similar fashion for the next forty days. This cumulative physical evidence confirmed John’s initial deduction from the grave clothes, and made the resurrection of Christ, not merely a theory that could be deduced from lifeless physical evidence, but a personal experience of the living Lord.

In our next chapter we must investigate another kind of evidence for the resurrection.
The Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ (III)

In our last chapter we examined some of the physical evidence for the resurrection of Christ. Now we are to consider an example of another kind of evidence.

II. Psychological evidence

We cite here the striking fact that in the whole of the New Testament (as distinct from later decadent centuries) there is not the slightest hint that the early Christians venerated the grave of Christ or made a shrine of his tomb. This is remarkable, for the Jews of the time were in the habit of venerating the tombs of their famous dead prophets (see Luke 11:47–48); but the Christians built no shrine around Jesus’ grave, nor made it a special place of pilgrimage or prayer. Nowhere in the New Testament is there the faintest suggestion that a visit to Jesus’ tomb was of some spiritual benefit or efficacy. When from time to time in the course of his missionary journeys the Apostle Paul returned to Jerusalem, we read of his calling on the Christian leaders, of his visiting the Jewish temple, of celebrating Pentecost, but never of his paying a visit to the tomb of Christ.

And this is all the more remarkable because in the hours that followed the Lord’s burial, the Christian women began to behave in a way that if unchecked would naturally have led to turning the tomb into a shrine of prayer and devotion to Christ. But something checked them. What was it? What power or influence was strong enough to overcome the natural psychological instincts that impel women in particular to cling to the relics of loved ones now dead? And what was it that throttled at birth any superstitious tendency to imagine that the tomb of Christ possessed magical powers?

A reconstruction of events

All four gospels are unanimous that the first Christians to visit Christ’s tomb on the third day after his burial were a group of women from Galilee. Out of gratitude for what Christ had done for them, these women had followed him on his long, slow journey to Jerusalem, and had helped and supported him from their own resources. They could afford to do so, for they were comparatively well off. One of them, indeed, a certain Joanna, was the wife of a man called Chuza, who was the manager of King Herod’s household (Luke 8:1–3). When Jesus was crucified, they stood watching at some distance from the cross along with others of Christ’s acquaintances (Luke 23:49). And when he was buried by Joseph and Nicodemus, both wealthy men, these well-to-do women from Galilee were not afraid to join the little burial procession. They saw
what tomb he was buried in, noted exactly where it was, and how the body was positioned in the tomb. They watched Nicodemus wrap 25 kg of aromatic spices in with the strips of linen that were bound round the body. But large and expensive as that amount of spices was, it was not enough for them. They wanted to express their own love and devotion to Christ. So they went back to the various places in Jerusalem at which they were staying over the Passover period (Joanna may well have been staying, with her husband, in Herod's Jerusalem palace); and there they prepared more spices and ointment (Luke 23:55–56). Their intention was to return to the tomb as soon as the Sabbath day was over and reverently and affectionately anoint the body of Jesus still more.

But at this point we meet a difficulty that has caused many people to conclude, after a superficial reading of the gospels, that their accounts of the resurrection of Christ contradict each other. That is not so. The difficulty arises simply because none of the gospel writers sets out to record everything that happened. Each writer selects from his particular sources what particularly interested him and fits it into the flow of his particular narrative; and in so doing he naturally omits or telescopes other events. But if we collect all that the four gospels between them say about the women from Galilee, we can with care compile a coherent account of what they did and where they went on the day in question. The story goes like this:

When, at early dawn on the first day of the week, they arrived at the tomb, they were startled to find the stone already rolled away from the entrance (Luke 24:1–2). Some of them entered—they could scarcely have all got inside at once—and immediately shouted their alarming discovery to the others, that the body was gone. Whereupon Mary Magdalene did not wait to see what happened next—which was that after a while two angels appeared to the women inside the tomb and told them that Christ was risen (Luke 24:4–8). Mary ran off at once as hard as she could to the house where John and Peter were staying. Breathlessly she reported what seemed to her the obvious explanation, that someone or ones had removed the body from the tomb and that neither she nor the other women knew where they had deposited it. Thereupon, Peter and John, as we saw in our last chapter, immediately ran to the tomb. From the presence, state and position of the grave clothes John concluded that a miracle had taken place: Christ must have risen from the dead; and with that, he and Peter went back (directly or indirectly) to the house where they were staying, and waited to see what would happen next (John 20:1–10).

Mary, however, went back to the tomb. The other women, of course, had gone. They had in fact been so scared by the appearance of the angels and by the message the angels ordered them to take to the apostles that for a while they told nobody about it (Mark 16:8). Presently joy got the upper hand over fear, and they started out to go to the apostles, when the risen Lord met them and confirmed the message they were to convey (Matt 28:9–10). Whereupon they proceeded, not like Mary had done to the house where John and Peter were staying, but to a small upper room in Jerusalem which the (now eleven) apostles had hired as a place to meet in. There the women told their amazing story to the apostles who by this time had been joined by John and Peter.

Let's leave them there for a while and rejoin Mary. This is what happened as she stood looking into the tomb.
But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her. (John 20:11–18)

Consider the following:

1. Mary had originally come to the tomb that morning with the other women from Galilee to honour the body of Christ. Dead though it was, she could not let it go. She would express her love to the Lord as she anointed his body with costly ointment, and stifled the smell of the corpse with her fragrant spices.

2. Distraught at finding the body gone, her one thought now was to regain possession of it: though she did not refer to the body as ‘it’; to her the dead body was still ‘him’. It was all she now had of him. ‘Tell me’, she said to the man whom she supposed was the gardener, ‘where you have laid him and I will take him away.’ For it was unbearable to her not to know where the body was and to be left with not even a relic of it, and not even a grave that she could venerate as his.

3. Suppose, then, the ‘gardener’ had showed her where the body was and she had taken it away. What would she have done with it? There is no doubt. She and the other women would have bought for it, or rather, him, the best tomb obtainable, no expense spared. Lovingly they would have buried him; and his grave would have become for them the most sacred place on earth. They would have made a shrine of it, venerated it, and visited it as often as they could.

4. But something happened to Mary that day in the garden that blew all such ideas clean out of her heart and head once and for ever. It must have been something very powerful to banish so completely and suddenly all the former psychological instincts and reactions. What was it?

5. It was that in the garden that day she encountered the living Lord Jesus, risen from the dead. Of course she abandoned the tomb! You don’t venerate the tomb of someone who is alive and whom you have just met! You don’t go to a tomb to pray to someone with whom you can have a direct living conversation!

6. But there was more to it than that. Mary’s previous experience of Jesus had been wonderful; but death seemed to have destroyed it, leaving her nothing but a dead body: fragrant memories but a blighted heart. Now Jesus did a wonderful thing. He replaced that earlier experience with an utterly new, warm, vibrant, living relationship between Mary and God the Father, between Mary and himself, a relationship bound together by a life that not even Mary’s eventual physical death
could possibly destroy. ‘Go tell my brothers,’ said he, ‘I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ Thereafter though still on earth, Mary knew herself bound to God and Christ in heaven by the indestructible power of eternal life already possessed, entered into, and enjoyed. So did all the other disciples. And so may all today who confess Jesus as Lord and believe in their hearts that God has raised him from the dead.

In her new-found life and ecstatic joy Mary now went to convey the risen Lord’s message to the other disciples. And this time she went, not to the house where John and Peter were staying, but to the upper room. There she reported to the Eleven and all the others that she had seen the Lord (Luke 24:10; John 20:18). That was more, of course, than Peter or John or any others of the Eleven had so far done; and Peter, much perplexed went off to examine the tomb once more (Luke 24:12). It was shortly after that—and before Christ appeared to all the apostles at once in the upper room—that he appeared to Peter (1 Cor 15:5, here called Cephas). The painful matter of Peter’s recent denial of the Lord had to be cleared up: and it was better done in private.

After this the early Christians showed no further interest in the tomb where the body of Christ had lain. They had no reason to visit it—they knew that Jesus had risen.

Suggestions for class work and discussion:

1. What, in your opinion, was the main thing that convinced Mary that Jesus had risen from the dead?

2. Get some of the boys in your class to play the parts of Peter and John and some of the girls to play the parts of the women at the tomb and encourage them to act out the events of Easter morning and discuss the evidence that Jesus was alive.

3. Why do you think people venerate tombs? Why did the early Christians not venerate the tomb of Christ?
The Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ (IV)

The writers of the New Testament tell us honestly that when on various occasions the disciples saw the risen Lord, some doubted (Matt 28:17). Sometimes the reason why they hesitated to believe was that it seemed too wonderful, too joyful, too good to be true. They did not want to believe it uncritically, only to find that it could not survive hard-headed examination (Luke 24:41). And then a miracle the size of a resurrection, when they first heard about it from the women who claimed to have met the risen Lord, seemed more likely to be the result of overheated imagination than hard, objective fact. But that kind of reluctance to believe was eventually swept away by the sheer concrete, tangible evidence of the risen Lord inviting them to touch him, sitting bodily with them and eating an ordinary meal (Luke 24:41–42).

But there was another form of unbelief, the cause of which ran deeper and had to be removed by somewhat different methods, as we shall now see.

III. The evidence of the Old Testament

And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was three-score furlongs from Jerusalem. And they communed with each other of all these things which had happened. And it came to pass, while they communed and questioned together, that Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. And he said unto them, What communications are these that ye have one with another, as ye walk? And they stood still, looking sad. And one of them, named Cleopas, answering said unto him, Dost thou alone sojourn in Jerusalem and not know the things which are come to pass there in these days? And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we hoped that it should redeem Israel. Yea and beside all this, it is now the third day since these things came to pass. Moreover certain women of our company amazed us, having been early at the tomb; and when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive. And certain of them that were with us went to the tomb, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not. And he said unto them, O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Behoved it not the Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:13–27)
1. The reason for the travellers’ disillusionment

The two travellers on the road to Emmaus were disillusioned; and the reason was this. On our Lord’s last visit to Jerusalem they had joined the large crowds who had genuinely thought that Jesus was the Messiah, whose coming was promised by God through the Old Testament prophets. Now from their (probably scant and superficial) knowledge of the Old Testament, they were expecting that the Messiah, when he came, would turn out to be a powerful military and political leader who would raise armies and lead the nation of Israel in a successful uprising against the imperialist forces of the Roman occupation. ‘We hoped’, they explained to the stranger who joined them on the road, ‘that he was the one who would liberate Israel.’

But, of course, Jesus had done no such thing. Far from liberating the masses of Israel, he had been arrested, tried, condemned and crucified by a combination of the Jewish religious establishment and the Roman military governor. And the mockery that had gone on at the trial had made a public laughing-stock of Jesus’ claim to be a king. At one blow the whole movement had come to nothing, like a pathetic, ill-organised, ineffectual peasant rising. What good was a political liberator who could not even save himself from being crucified?

So the two travellers were going home in profound disillusionment.

2. Why at first could they not take in the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead?

It was because, to their way of thinking, Jesus had not fulfilled the Old Testament’s promises of a coming Liberator–King. Instead, he had been defeated, crucified, a failure. He was therefore not the promised Messiah. And that being so, the rumour that he had risen from the dead seemed not only incredible in itself but irrelevant into the bargain. If he wasn’t the Messiah, what was the point of his being raised from the dead?

3. What had to be done to make faith in the resurrection possible for them?

Notice that at the beginning of his conversation with them the risen Lord did not attempt to convince them that he was Jesus. Indeed he first gently chided them because their reading of the Old Testament had been unduly selective. They had read the parts that appealed to them, about the promised coming of a Liberator–King. But they had overlooked, or not understood, or conveniently forgotten the parts that foretold that the Messiah would first have to suffer and die, and only after that would be raised from the dead and enter his glory. And so the stranger took them through the whole Old Testament and pointed out passages that either stated, or else clearly implied, this. The point of the lesson was obvious: if the Old Testament prophesied that Messiah must first suffer and die, then Jesus’ sufferings and death, far from proving that he was not the Messiah, were strong evidence that he was. If, in addition, the Old Testament prophesied that after his death Messiah would live again and liberate his people and share with them the spoils of a great victory, then to do that he would have to rise from the dead. The reports which the two travellers had heard
from the women that Jesus was risen and that they had seen him, might therefore be true after all. The stumbling-block that had prevented their believing was removed.

**Exercise:**

1. Read Isa 53:8–12. This is one of the Old Testament passages that the stranger would have referred to. Get your students to examine it and discover how it does indeed imply that the Messiah would first suffer and die, and then rise from the dead.


### 4. The relevance of this incident to us

Still for us today one of the most important strands of evidence for the resurrection of Christ is that the Old Testament foretold, not only that the Messiah would rise from the dead, but that he would do so as an integral part of God’s plan for the redemption of mankind. Notice the repeated emphasis on this fact in the Apostle Paul’s great statement of the Christian gospel:

For I delivered unto you, first of all that which also I received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3–4)

A report that some otherwise unheard-of ordinary individual had been raised from the dead unexpectedly and for no apparent reason might well be difficult to believe. We should all ask: ‘Why him?’ and ‘What is the point of it?’ and ‘How can we believe that such an extraordinary exception to the laws of nature has taken place arbitrarily and for no apparent reason?’ Atheists, of course, believe that the universe as a whole has come into existence for no apparent reason. Its existence cannot be accounted for: it is just an arbitrary, inexplicable, brute fact. Those who believe in an intelligent Creator, however, would find it difficult to believe that the Creator had overruled the normal laws of nature arbitrarily to raise some obscure individual from the dead for no apparent reason.

But Jesus was no ordinary person! He was God incarnate. Nor was his resurrection an isolated phenomenon. It was part of the Creator’s gigantic plan for the redemption of mankind and for the eventual renewal of the universe. Nor was the story of the resurrection invented by Christ’s disciples. God had had it announced through his prophets and written down in the Old Testament centuries before Jesus was born into our world. And it is still open to us today to study the Old Testament seriously and see for ourselves whether the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ match the Old Testament’s God-given prophecies.

### 5. When Jesus had finished his rapid survey of the Old Testament, the main difficulty in the way of the travellers’ believing was removed

But they still did not recognise that the stranger was in fact Jesus risen from the dead. How, then, did they come to recognise him? We must look at that in detail because it raises a large general question.
IV. What evidence convinced the disciples that the person who appeared to them claiming to be Jesus risen from the dead was actually Jesus and not some kind of impersonation?

And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they were going: and he made as though he would go further. And they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is now far spent. And he went in to abide with them. And it came to pass, when he had sat down with them to meat, he took the bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. And they said one to another, Was not our heart burning within us, while he spake to us in the way, while he opened to us the scriptures? And they rose up that very hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they rehearsed the things that happened in the way, and how he was known of them in the breaking of the bread. (Luke 24:28–35)

1. The two travellers

They invited the stranger to stay the night with them, and they sat him down to an evening meal. But still they had not recognised who he was. Then he took the bread that was on the table, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. And in that instant their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight. Later, when they returned to Jerusalem and recounted their experience, they explained that Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.

What was there so special about his breaking of the bread? First, in taking the bread, breaking it, giving thanks and giving it to them in their own house, he was taking over the role of the host. That must have riveted their attention on him. Second, in that moment as he broke the bread they would have caught sight of the nail-prints in his hands. But there was more to it than that. Watching those hands break the bread the way he did, it would have evoked memories of what only the closest of Jesus’ disciples could have known about. They would have heard from the eleven apostles before they left for Emmaus how at the Passover meal on the night he was betrayed Jesus has taken bread, broken it and uttered what then must have sounded very mysterious words, but words which no one ever had said to them before: ‘This is my body which is given for you.’ There had followed the (for them) devastating experience of the cross. But now they had listened to the stranger’s exposition of Old Testament passages. These passages not only prophesied that Messiah would have to die and rise again, but also explained why: he would have to die for his people’s sins, and indeed for theirs too. Now as they saw him with nail-pierced hands break bread and give it to them personally, his action carried profound overtones which no impersonator could have known about or invented. Its significance was utterly and uniquely peculiar to Jesus. They recognised him at once. It was unmistakably Jesus.
2. **But what about those millions, like us today, who have never seen, and cannot see Jesus with our own two eyes?**

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Jesus cometh, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and see my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and put it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. (John 20:24–29)

Notice:

1. Jesus did not rebuke Thomas for doubting. He respected his honesty.
2. Jesus did not rebuke him for demanding evidence before he would believe.
3. Jesus gave Thomas the evidence he asked for.
4. This reveals an interesting and important thing. Jesus had obviously heard Thomas speak and heard his demand for evidence even though Thomas was unaware of his presence at the time; for when he entered the room, without waiting for Thomas to say anything, he offered him the evidence he had earlier demanded.
5. That reminds us that at this very moment because Jesus is risen from the dead, he hears what we say and knows what we are thinking. And we may certainly express ourselves freely and say, if we really mean it: ‘If Jesus is really alive, let him provide me with evidence that I can really believe; and then I will believe on him.’
6. But before we do so, let us ponder deeply what else Jesus said to Thomas: ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.’ Evidence that can be seen with physical eyesight is not the only kind of evidence available that Jesus is alive. If it were, physically blind people could never see it. It is not, in fact, by itself the best kind of evidence. The evidence that is perceived by our conscience, heart and spirit, is far and away the best evidence. And no one ever speaks to our hearts like Jesus does. He says that he personally loves us and died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and has risen again according to the Scriptures; and that if we open our hearts to him, he will enter and fill them with his presence and love. If with conscience, heart and spirit we listen to him speaking the Bible to us as he did to the travellers; and if we come to see that his hands were nailed to the cross as he gave himself to death for us personally; we shall find that ‘faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ’ (Rom 10:17). And we too shall find our hearts burning within us as he talks to us on life’s journey and opens to us the Scriptures.