

No One Else Matters (Part Two)

The Carnality of the Apostles

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Please turn in your Bibles to Hebrews the eighth chapter. We will be reading verses 6-13. Verse 7 and on in my Bible is titled, A New Covenant, and that is basically the subject I am starting out with here today.

Hebrews 8:6-13 But now He has obtained [That is Christ.] a much more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

We understand in our many years in the church—Dr Maas was talking about 54 years, Dad was talking this morning about his 61 years in the church. I can only say from 1984, so what is that? 36 years for me. But many of us have been in the church for an awful long time, and we have learned a lot about the New Covenant. It has been a major topic that we have learned about over the years and what we understand from it, if nothing else, is that it

is a vastly better covenant than the Old Covenant. As a matter of fact, that is a major theme of the book of Hebrews: That the Old Covenant, which is ready to pass away, does not come close to the glories of the New Covenant.

In this passage here that we have just seen, God highlights, maybe what we could say is the primary difference between the two of them, and that is that His laws, His principles, the things that He believes and He propounds to be what is right and good, His laws will be written on the minds and hearts of the people rather than on tablets of stone. They will be in us, they will be engraved on our inward parts, as it were, so that it will always be with us. We will not have to look to another thing—a monument, a couple of stone tablets, or what have you—to see what they are. We will know them.

And of course, it says there in verse 11, that not only will we know the laws and the principles, but we will know Him, and that is a great advantage over what the Israelites had. They did not understand God at all. As a matter of fact, when Moses first met God, as it were, he had to ask Him His name. What name shall I tell the children of Israel that they should call You? And so another vastly superior thing that we have as an advantage.

Paul encapsulates this in the opening words of verse 8. He says, "because finding fault with them." God had to then say, "I'm going to give a New Covenant that's better." The fault in the covenant was in the people. God had not given them heart to understand His way of life, as we read this morning in Deuteronomy 29:4. They did not have what it takes to understand. They could not comprehend what God was doing. They had a very hard time even following simple orders. So they failed. They failed in just about every way imaginable. But the big thing to God was that they had failed to continue in the covenant. That is what He says at the end of verse 9, "because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them," says the Lord. Ultimately, that was the reason; they could not keep a simple agreement. They did not have the heart to do it.

Now the New Covenant is based on God giving His elect a new spirit, the Holy Spirit. And that is the spirit, part of God that He gives to us that enables us to understand, to choose properly, to overcome sin and selfishness, as we are doing in this week, as we do it all the time, but we are especially focusing on it this week, and to stay the course. Israel, without the Holy

Spirit, could not stay the course, they could not continue. It just did not allow them to see the future or there was not enough of a promise there, maybe even. I mean, they were in the land. They were living in the land, and there was no future beyond that that they could really grasp on to.

But we have been given something greater, and through the Holy Spirit we understand these things and have a lot to live for. As I mentioned before, the New Covenant contains better promises, certainly a better High Priest, far superior to Aaron. What did Aaron do? One of the first things we see him doing is making a golden calf because the people were able to convince him to do so. We have a High Priest that is constant and always gives honor and glory to the Father. Of course, the same One is the better Mediator of the covenant. Better than angels. There is a better sacrifice for sin in that same Person. He is a far greater sacrifice than any kind of bull or goat or lamb or what have you.

So Paul's discourse is designed to establish point by point by point—sometimes it is chapter by chapter, sometimes it is two or three points within a chapter. But he goes through in a very methodical way to establish the superiority of Jesus Christ, and the superiority of the New Covenant, and to show them in comparison to the old way. The old, now obsolete system that God says here in verse 13 is ready to disappear. It is not necessary anymore because it has been superseded by a far superior covenant.

Since the coming of Christ, particularly once He was resurrected, God has been working under this new system, and those He calls, who repent and believe, receive that Spirit, that Holy Spirit, that different spirit, that mind of Christ, as it were. And this makes things so much better. My dad was saying this morning how much harder it is for us to go through our wilderness wandering, but we have help that they did not have. I do not want to say, necessarily, that it makes things easier, but it can, if we use it, and it does make everything so much better. It is a vast, spiritual improvement over the physicality of the Old Covenant. You compare the spiritual aspects of the New Covenant and all the future and better promises that are in there as compared to the Old Covenant, and the Old Covenant just looks weak.

Let us go to I Corinthians 2. We are still on this idea of the Holy Spirit. We will get this explained to us by the apostle here just a little bit more.

I Corinthians 2:11 For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?

So we have a spirit that has been given to us. It comes to us by birth, by being a person in this species, as it were. We have something that God gives us that allows us to be human, allows us to have language and those other things that make us mankind, humanity. So much better than the animals. So, he says, we have a spirit that allows us to know human things.

I Corinthians 2:11 Even so, no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.

So he is showing us another level, an additional spirit that can be given to us if we are called, and if we accept Jesus Christ is our Savior, and we repent of our sins, and we believe, and do all those things that we are supposed to do as we begin our trek, our conversion. But that Spirit has access to a lot more, far beyond what normal humanity can understand. Those are the things that God understands.

I Corinthians 2:12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.

So not only can we understand the things of God, the spiritual things, but we find out that all of those spiritual things are *freely given* to us. We do not have to pay for them. We do not have to work for them. He just gives them, and allows us by His Spirit, which He also freely gives us, to know those things.

I Corinthians 2:13 These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For "who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

And that is a bomb shell. He leaves that right for the end of the chapter, the last thing he is going to say about the Holy Spirit, at least in this section. And he says that essentially, the Holy Spirit gives us the mind of Christ. What a huge step forward from the Old Covenant and the lack of any kind of Spirit like that! The Israelites, you know, if you read what happened to them between Genesis and Deuteronomy, they barely knew their *own* minds. One day they wanted to do this, another day they wanted to do that. Their actions, not only in the wilderness, but the whole Old Testament, all the history of their people, exposes their inconsistency, their hypocrisy, their confusion, their rebellion, their stubbornness.

They did not have God's Spirit, and so their minds were just like any other worldly person's mind. They did not have that advantage. They were, as Romans 8:7 says, carnal. Their minds were carnal and because their minds were carnal, they were hostile to God, at enmity with Him, and they rejected His law so they could not do it. You could say their minds were closed to spiritual things. They just could not get through. As much as Moses might have, you know, preached at them and told them what to do, as much as Joshua might have tried to do that, or any of the judges, or David or any of the prophets, it just did not sink in because they did not have a mind to receive it. They did not have that extra spiritual something, which we call the Holy Spirit, to allow that stuff in and make a difference in their lives.

Paul says here in chapter 2 of I Corinthians that with the Holy Spirit, we cannot only control our own minds, but that we also can know Christ's mind. I mean, that is mind boggling, astounding! It is a *giant* leap forward, if you will. It gives us the capacity, little human beings like us, to make true, divine judgments. That is what the mind of Christ does. It makes divine decisions, divine choices. It is another way of saying the things that God would do. Because we have the Holy Spirit, we can actually think, speak, and do on that level. Most of us are very bad at it, but even so, with the Holy Spirit, we have the potential to do that.

Now, it is not going to happen immediately, but with studying God's Word, a lot of prayer, a lot of meditation, a lot of really thinking hard about what God wants us to do, and then having the guts in this world to do what God wants you to do, you can start making divine decisions and actually following

through on them. It is possible! The Holy Spirit permits us, as Paul says here, to discover and comprehend the things of God, even the deep things. I mean, that is crazy. That is crazy talk, we say. But yeah, it is true. God's Holy Spirit does not just open up access to the basic levels. We can go way down deep into the deep things of God because God has given us the key to do that if we use it properly, if we use it enough.

Paul says, unlike other people on this earth, we can truly compare spiritual things with spiritual things. They cannot compare anything to the spirit world. They can only compare things to what they see around them, what they can test with their five senses. That is all they know. So they compare physical things with physical. If you give them a spiritual thing, all they can do is compare it to something physical. It does not make them rise up any higher than that. Now, the Bible is full of physical comparisons to help us understand spiritual things. But Paul says we can go another step beyond that and start comparing spiritual things with other spiritual things without the intervention of the physical. We have been given, as it were, a sixth sense, a God sense that allows us to understand things that are far beyond human carnal comprehension. And then when we compare these spiritual things to spiritual, we can come to correct judgments about them and how to use them.

As Jesus says in John 6:45, after that verse that tells us that the Father draws us all to Him, He says we can now be taught by God. We do not necessarily need the intervention of men. He uses them. I am a case in point and all the other ministers that God has called. They are also there to help teach the people. But with God's Spirit, He could go directly to each person's mind because His Spirit is in us. The Holy Spirit is not an external teacher, but an internal, always on, divine guide, because it is God in us through His Spirit. It is almost too good to be true, that these tools have been given to us, this great advantage, and you compare the Israelites and what they did not have, with us and what we do have, it is just ridiculous to think that we have it so much better.

We have access through the veil. They could not even come within, I do not know how many feet it was, but you know, they had to stay in the court of Israel. Only the Levites could come into that inner court to do the work that they were going to do. Only the priests could go into the Holy Place, and only the high priest once a year could go into the Holy of Holies. A lot of

what was in the Old Testament ritual was designed to show God holding them off at arm's length because He was going to call a people in time through Jesus Christ that He could bring close, or as the biblical language is, draw them near. Draw them close into a great bear hug, if you will, because we are His children.

Let us go to II Corinthians 4, please. I will read verses six and seven.

II Corinthians 4:6-7 For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts [This is part of what he is talking about, is under the New Covenant etching that stuff in our hearts, His law.] to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. [Or we could say the image of Jesus Christ, or in the person of Jesus Christ.] But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

So the very Creator God who caused light to shine out of the darkness of this universe, has given us, in our hearts, within us in our minds, this ability through God's Spirit, to understand the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That is, He is the central focus of this knowledge, that it is all about Him, and that the things that He said and the things that He did form the central pillar of all that we are to know. And you could even say that one way to understand this is that if you understand Jesus Christ as fully as possible, then you understand the glory of God.

But the big problem is, is what is said in verse 7. That we have this in our physical bodies, during our physical lifetimes. And God did this to give Him glory, because then, because of our physical bodies, and our physical way of looking at things, and our traditions of men, and all those things, not to mention the human nature that we carry around with us all the time, we are going to make big mistakes. But getting us there into His Kingdom is going to be to God's glory because He did it in people who just did not have what it takes to make it on their own.

The weak spot, as it were, in the whole scheme of God, is this idea that God has given us this great gift, but we are carnal, we are physical, we are fleshly individuals, we are made of earth. We are still material. We die, we get sick,

we are weak. We have all kinds of flaws. Yet God still has decided to give us this great gift of Christ in us. God is still working with human beings, just like He did back in the days of Moses. Still working with human beings and all the weaknesses that are inherent in human beings. And that is a lot of weaknesses.

Like the Corinthians in I Corinthians 3:3. He says, they were still carnal. We still have inside us, residing in us, things like envy and strife and divisions and every other stripe of sin, just like they did. Because even though God has forgiven us of our past sins, those He has carried away as far as east is from the west, human nature still exerts great influence on us. And our decisions are influenced by that human nature too and our behaviors, then, are influenced by that human nature. It is hard to get away from. So we still, as Paul says back there in I Corinthians 3:3-4, "You still behave like men," as if he expected them to behave like something more than men, greater than men—like God.

But we do. We still behave like ordinary people, we still sin, we still do very carnal things, and we kick ourselves for it. But it is still there. We could go through Romans 7 and show how Paul, 20 years after his conversion, is still agonizing over the fact that he sinned and he just could not seem to stop. He called it another law within him that was warring against what he actually wanted to do, which was to be righteous. But it is this fact here that he brings out in II Corinthians. That God has given us such a *huge* gift, such a wonderful thing. But we are still earthen vessels. We are still carnal. We still have a lot of problems.

If you will turn back to the book of Jude, back as in the back of your Bible, not that we have been there before in the sermon. Notice what Jude was writing about here.

Jude 3-4 Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation [See, he wanted to talk to them about good things, about salvation and doctrinal matters, let us say.], I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turned the

grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

Jude 8 Likewise, also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries. . . .

Jude 10-11 But these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves. Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.

Jude is writing about problems in the church. Men in the church who come in and teach things and do things that are not right. That if they were actually using the Holy Spirit, they would understand they are not right. They are men, and they are men who have weaknesses. Maybe they had a first love and a zeal at one point, but over the years things changed and they were able to be persuaded by false teachings of one stripe or another, and pretty soon they come into positions of power and they start turning the rest of the church away from, as he puts it here, "the grace of our God" into something else. They pervert the gospel.

So despite the tremendous advantage that the elect have through the Holy Spirit, the church under Jesus Christ is still led by carnal human beings with all the human weaknesses and foibles of everybody else. Now hopefully most of those leaders are good leaders and if they have a weakness or a sin they work on it and overcome it. That is what they are supposed to do! But some do not. I know it has been a long time since Worldwide Church of God. I mean, when we came out it was 1992, so that was 28 years ago when that happened. And a lot of the things that happened at that time were not good things. But many of us have memories of those things, those kind of people, and we understand this may be a little more than some of the newer people do. That people get into high positions and they do terrible things to the church, to the brethren. This fact, this idea that humans, even leaders in the church, are still human, makes us understand that it is going to happen in the church as long as there are human beings.

I want to think about the apostasies that happened in the first century church. Jude and the other apostles had to deal with these things. Men under them were taking the church in an entirely different direction. Here are Jude, Paul, James, and Peter, and many of the others, they went back all the way. Well, Paul did not. He was he ordained, called a little while later, but it is certainly the Twelve. And Jude and James were Jesus' brothers, and they evidently came on board right after the resurrection. So these men went all the way back. They had seen Jesus. They had heard His words and yet people who came later into the church and had not heard Him directly, were starting to move things in the wrong direction.

The apostles had to deal with these sorts of things. These men, these teachers, these ministers, even evangelists. They had been entrusted with spreading and expounding on the gospel, but a percentage of them, who knows how many, began to pervert it. Galatians 1:6-7, written in about 50 AD, tells us that Paul was kind of shocked that it was so soon that men started perverting the gospel. And he says it is not another, but it was another. It was different. There were things that seemed the same, but they have been slightly shifted and perverted so that it appeared on the outside to be similar to what the church of God would teach in a proper way, but it was just enough changed that it made it different. Another gospel.

He also wrote similar things to the Thessalonians about the same time. It had such a profound effect on the church. This rot from the inside, if you will, had such a profound effect on the church that the heresies had taken over the church by the mid-second century, and there were only a few left who were actually keeping the doctrine that Jesus and the original apostles had given. It only took about 100 years. From 31 AD to about that time, maybe a little later in the second century. That could really affect a person's faith, could it not? Jude writes about this, but John does, too. Let us go back a few pages to I John 2.

I am sure many of these men were changing things a lot like Joe Tkach and his cabal did in Worldwide Church of God after Herbert Armstrong died. We have kind of an understanding of how that works. We understand how false teachers get into a church because, just like what happened in the 80s and 90s, the people that were changing things in the first century church were

probably respected men that came up with a difference of opinion somewhere along the way, and people followed them. It invariably happens that way. Here is John's take on it.

I John 2:3-4 [He says] Now by this we know that we know Him [meaning Christ], if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

We have John, writing a great deal in his epistles here, about how to tell a true member from a false member, how to tell a true minister from a false minister. He gives here one of the keys of being able to tell a true member or minister from a false one and that is that the true member, the true minister, keeps the commandments and those who do not, well, they are false because one of the sure undergirdings of the church is keeping God's commandments. That is a major part of keeping the covenant. Those are the laws that He is writing on our hearts and we are not supposed to keep them? Makes no sense.

But the false ministers were teaching this sort of thing. Just like Jude said, they were turning the grace of God into licentiousness, or lewdness, or however it is translated in your Bible. They were changing things so that the the commandments of God do not matter. Let us drop down to verse 18.

I John 2:18-20 Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you [Here we get back to what we were talking about earlier.] have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth.

What is he talking about here? Like I said, he gives detailed instructions in these epistles about how to distinguish a true minister or member from a false one. A true one, as we saw there in verses 3 and 4, keeps the commandments. Go on a little further, the true one follows Christ's

teachings. In fact, not only just follows, but we are to walk in His steps—right behind Him. A true minister or member behaves like Christ as much as possible and strives to improve his walk, as we are doing in this holy day period, we are putting out of the old leaven and putting on the new—Christ—is what we are talking about here. About improving our walk, about getting better, about being more righteous.

The true disciple, or the true minister, speaks the truth. Not only do they know the truth, they speak the truth. But false teachers and false teachings are, like I said before, a constant. There is something we always have to be ready to battle. They have been among us, and they will continue to be among us in the future. But John says here, those things, those teachings, as well as those who teach them, are not of us. They are not part of us. They are like a virus that comes among us and wreaks havoc with our system—wreaks havoc with people's faith and their actions prove it. We can tell by the way the false teachers act, what they say is wrong. We can prove it by what they say. I am trying to think of another way to say that but that is basically it. We can look at them, evaluate what they say and what they do, and it should give us an indication of which side they are on.

John points out here in verse 20 that we who are true brethren having anointing from the "Holy One." That is the Holy Spirit. We have been anointed through the laying on of hands, as it were, with the Holy Spirit, and then he says, that we know all things. That is literally what he says. He says, "and you know all things." That is a literal translation from the Greek. Now, if I were to ask any of you Honus Wagner's batting average, would you know it? No. Obviously he is not telling us that we *know* all things in that way. What does he mean?

Well, it does not mean that we know everything, but it does mean that we *know the truth*. We already know the truth. It has already been revealed to us. It has already been taught to us. The apostles left nothing unsaid that needed to be said. They gave, as Paul said, the whole counsel of God. So in this sense, in the limited meaning or the limited area which John is talking about here, that is the truth of God, it is all there. It has all been revealed to us. Remember, John, in this epistle, is writing right toward the end of the first century. He was obviously aware that the apostles, himself included, were dying off. They had done their work. The canon of Scripture, as it

were, was beginning to close and they had not left out anything that was necessary. So he says, You know all things, you know everything that you need to know. It is all there in the Scripture and in the teaching that they had taught them about the truth. So they had two big factors here. They had the Holy Spirit—they had the anointing—and they had the whole truth.

Remember, the subject is false teachers and false teachings. So he says, "Look people, this is not hard. You have the Holy Spirit, you have the truth, make use of them." What he is telling them, if I could put it in a negative way, is that false teachers and their false teachings have nothing to add to what has already been revealed and taught. If somebody comes to you with a *new* revelation, new truth. . . have you not heard that phrase before? Somebody comes to you with the new truth or a personal revelation from who knows who (they always say it is from God) but it could be from anybody, well, then you know you should reject it.

I mean, we get that a lot. "I had a dream the other night, and, you know, God told me to tell you this." We just have to say that we work out of the Scripture. We do not work out of dreams and visions of people. But it sometimes is like the new truths that we had to face in the late 80s and early 90s, where they were twisting Scripture in order to bring the church of God into Protestantism. That was "new truth." Actually, it was old lies in new clothing is what it was and some of us were able to see through it. Unfortunately, too many of us were not.

So if we would use the Holy Spirit and then compare spiritual with spiritual, as it were, we should be able to see the truth, to see that someone is not dividing the truth of God in a proper way. Because we have the truth on one side and the Holy Spirit on the other side, and if we put them together and use them, we should be able to see the difference between the true and the false. We already have the tools we need to reject deceitful ideas of false teachers and as it says here, even the Antichrist. We should be able to do it. You have a mind, it is a good mind. Then on top of that you have the Holy Spirit and you have that Book that is laying in your lap and that with sound teaching from elsewhere, hopefully in this church and in the other churches of God, we can weather those kinds of false teachers and false teachings.

But the fact remains that false teachers and their false teachings exist because human nature is still alive and well. And it influences true brethren and true ministers. We all make mistakes. We all sin. We all have foibles of one kind or another. Where we go wrong as members of the church is when we elevate a brother's or a minister's human weaknesses above the truth, and above the truth that he himself teaches and tries to practice. But we allow one thing, one weakness that we hone in on to undermine us and if we hone it enough, if we focus in enough on all those physical problems and weaknesses, what ends up having problems, what ends up weakening, is our relationship with God because we are focused on a man and his sins and our faith begins to diminish.

It reveals that we are looking to men rather than to God. We are like Peter when he stepped out of the boat there on the Sea of Galilee and he takes one step or two and he starts toward Christ. But when he starts to see the ground around and about rather than Christ Himself, he begins to sink. He has taken his focus off what is central, which is Christ, and looked to the physical and that puts him in grave spiritual danger.

We are going to, in this sermon, consider the weaknesses of God's servants, this time in the New Testament. Then we are comparing them all this while in the back of our minds to Christ perfection. Even under the New Covenant, human sin rears its ugly head, and there is a lot of examples of it. We have to make sure that we focus our minds on Christ and the Father in heaven. Our relationship with God is supreme. He is the only One that truly matters. So please do not let questionable human leadership derail your journey to the Kingdom of God. You have got to be able to see beyond the human leaders to God. Believe in, trust in *Him*, and He will lead you to the Kingdom of God, and leave the judgment of His servants to Him, to whom they themselves must give account.

I am going to go fairly quickly, I hope, through a bunch of the apostles, just to give you an idea that this has been a problem throughout the whole church and it does not, in terms of the apostles, have to be a problem that remains. If we forgive one another of our human sins and weaknesses, then we can move forward together. But, I know that a lot of people, you know, things came out about Mr Armstrong or Garner Ted, or Joe Tkach, or whoever it

was, and they would say, "I'm not going to stay in this church with leadership like that." And they went off and who knows where they are now. But they just saw an imperfect man and thought that that reflected upon God's perfection. And it does not! It just shows that He uses human earthen vessels and earthen vessels make mistakes because they are still earthly. They are still carnal. We need to make sure that we leave the judgment of His servants to Him and just move forward, trusting God that He will do what is right and good for us to make it to the Kingdom of God.

Let us go to Matthew 9. We will read verses 9 through 13. This is the calling of Matthew.

Matthew 9:9-13 As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him. Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Matthew is the author of this gospel, and he does himself no favors here in writing about himself. He is the one who is also called Levi in other gospels. He could have deceitfully given himself a far better pre-conversion biography. But no, he gives it to us straight here—he was a tax collector. Or as the Jews thought of it, if you were a tax collector, you were a sinner. You were a man despised by the rest of the population. And certainly, as we see here in the rest of the passage, he was despised by the religious authorities of his day. They had their noses way up in the air when they came across a tax collector because they thought of them as just the worst of the bunch.

What were Roman era tax collectors like? Well, first of all, they were considered social and often religious outcasts. They were not as bad as lepers, who were unclean, but especially the religious leaders, who thought that because they associated with the unclean they were pretty much unclean

themselves. They avoided them at all costs. Their profession was a byword for sinner. That is why those two words end up next to each other quite often. A tax collector and a sinner. They were considered thieves getting rich on the backs of the poor and the unfortunate. And they were also considered collaborators with the Roman government. They were the pawnbrokers, they were almost like how we look at politicians in this day, getting rich in their public office and not really thinking a whole lot about the people. Just in it for themselves.

This is a quotation from the *Baker New Testament Commentary: Matthew*.

The tax buyers, or farmers, had paid a fixed sum of money to the Roman government for the privilege of levying tolls upon exports and imports, as well as upon whatever merchandise passed through the region. The farmers, tax farmers, would sublet their rights to chief publicans as shown in Luke 19:2 who employed publicans to do the collecting. These charged what the traffic would bear—huge sums. So the publican had the reputation of being an extortionist. If he were a Jew, he was regarded by his fellows as being also a renegade or traitor, for he was in the service of the foreign oppressor.

This is what the Jews would do or these tax collectors would do. The Romans would find rich people among the people that they conquered and they would offer them a deal. They would say, "I want you to give me 1,000 drachmas as tax for this particular period of time." Let us say it is a year. That was probably low. "But you are tax farmer, what you need to give me is 1,000 drachmas." And he said, "Okay," and the Roman would say, "And you can keep whatever else you collect." So the farmer would go find a chief publican, and he would say the Romans came to me and they said they wanted 2,000 drachmas, so whatever is over 2,000 drachmas you could keep.

Then the great publican would go find another publican to do the dirty work for him and he said, "It's coming down the line that the Romans want 3,000 drachmas and whatever else you can collect, that's yours to keep." So the way it worked out was that the people who were being taxed were being taxed 3, 4, 5, 10, 15 times. Who knows? Just depends on how long this pyramid scheme worked. Way over what the Romans actually wanted. And

so each person up the line, as he shoveled the money up the pyramid, would make more and more money. Finally, the Romans had no reason to stop this because in order to be as a thank offering, being grateful for the position, the guy at the top, the tax farmer, would give the Roman official a nice, hefty bonus, along with the 1,000 drachmas that he had originally been told to give.

So they were fraudulent all the way up and down the line, and they would squeeze the money out of the people and this is why the people thought of them as such extortioners, that they had to pay way, way more in taxes than they really should have. And it did not help that many publicans flaunted their wealth. Stuck it in the faces of their fellow Jews and whatnot because they had all this money that they had gotten from ill-gotten gains.

And it is kind of interesting that the first thing that Matthew does, he probably did it in a generous way, is he makes a big feast for Christ and basically shows off his wealth in this feast. Feasts are not inexpensive to put out for all these people. He had all his fellow publicans with him and other sinners, as well as Jesus and his twelve disciples, and who knows who else came to it, and that is why the Pharisees, when they saw this, what they saw was a tax collector, a sinner showing off his wealth, not seeing it as a farewell dinner, let us say, or as something in gratitude to Jesus for calling him. Just a little aside there.

It shows you that when Matthew was called, he had a great deal of wealth, and this was the sort of thing that perhaps could have followed him around throughout his ministry. The guy at the top of a particular church, a congregation, a region, and all the tithes were going up the ladder to the apostle, and this apostle was a former tax collector. Could you see that people might get an idea that he was at his old tricks again? Perhaps. I am not saying Matthew was like that. He seemed like, from things that we read about him, he was pretty good guy. But you can see how something like that, a human weakness, could follow an apostle around for a long time.

Let us go to another one. Matthew the 26th chapter. Of course we have to talk about Peter.

Matthew 26:31-35 Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will

strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all were made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny you!" And so said all the disciples.

Matthew 26:69-75 [This was after Jesus was arrested and faced the Sanhedrin.] Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee." [Notice this is not a question, it is a statement.] But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying." [I do not know what you are talking about.] And when he had gone out to the gateway [probably trying to get away from that servant girl], another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth." [Again, not a question. She positively identifies him.] But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!" And later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, because your speech betrays you." [Another just plain statement.] Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!" And immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the words of Jesus, who said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And then he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter is the big fisherman, that rash and bluff leader, the apostle, first among equals. But one of the lasting images of him throughout all of history is as the denier of Christ, unable to stand firm under those withering accusations of the servant girls and a few bystanders. He was not all that bold and strong at this point. He was running for his life. He accompanied his denial with vehement oaths and curses. He swore a blue streak at them in denial. We could say that his denial was undeniable by how vehemently, how strenuously he went about it. It was something that later he never truly forgave himself for, I am sure, that he was so weak. But it also made him sincerely grateful for the forgiveness of God, that God was able to forgive him of that.

Let us stay in the same chapter and read verse 35 again. Just the last verse or last sentence. "So said all the disciples."

Let us read verse 56.

Matthew 26:56 "But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." [This was Christ's arrest.] Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled.

So Peter was not alone in his denial and forsaking of Christ. All the other disciples had said that they would never forsake Him, never deny Him, and *all* did it. *All* is pretty comprehensive. All of them, all eleven that were left at that point denied and forsook Him. None of them stood with Jesus when the crunch came. Instead, they saved their own skins. Dr. Maas was talking about being cowardly. That is the eleven disciples when Jesus was arrested. And even for a while after, they were still looking backwards behind them for days and weeks after that. They were all about saving their own skins while Christ was out there saving theirs.

Go to John 20. Let us not forget Thomas.

John 20:24-29 Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. [He had come in earlier.] The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I 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, His disciples were again inside, and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

At this point of his life, Thomas walked by sight, not by faith. The resurrected Christ's admonishment of him in verse 29 probably made him feel about an inch tall. Notice, He says, "Blessed are those who believe without seeing." What did that mean about Thomas? Well, Jesus was quick to forgive him and his weakness, but the idea was probably always there in his head. "Why did not I believe? He had told me 1,000 times 'After three days, I will rise.'" But he did not believe. He fell back on his humanity.

Let us go to Galatians 2. We are going to pick on Peter again.

Galatians 2:11-14 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I [This is Paul writing.] withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

I am just going to go from there. He reads them the riot act what the doctrine really is. But Paul reprimanded him here, a fellow apostle, because he was to be blamed for he played the hypocrite. That is not an easy thing for a minister to take, to be called a hypocrite. This happened 4 to 5 years after the Jerusalem Council, about 50-51 AD, somewhere in there.

And so the decree that had gone out from Peter and from James and the other apostles there in Acts 15 had been out there for that amount of time, 4 or 5 years. Here was the man whom God had used to open salvation to the Gentiles, and he was hypocritically separating himself from them within the church at their, what would you call it, their little feasts, or when they were having church services or potlucks or what have you. And I am sure others, it actually says that others looked to him and followed his example, even Barnabas, who has very little negative said about him throughout the whole New Testament, deferred to the Jerusalem Jews. No one is lily white.

In Acts 7 Paul was the one who the people put their clothes at Saul's feet when they stoned Stephen. Paul was the one that was breathing out slaughter against the church. He was the one that was hailing people into jail. He is the one got the high priest's permission to go to Damascus and bring people from Damascus back to Jerusalem for trial. Throughout all of these things that I was going to read in Acts 7, 8, and 9, 22 and 26, we find out that Paul not only persecuted the church of God, he consented to Stephen's death. He imprisoned men and women. He caused some of them to blaspheme, perhaps under torture, and he sent unknown others to their deaths, condemning them with his vote in the Sanhedrin. We could say that he was the acknowledged leader in the opposition to the early church. That is why they put their clothes at his feet. They were basically saying, this is the one we are serving while we stone Stephen. We could call him the tip of the spear in some of the most violent early persecutions of the church. I mean, talk about having to worry about a minister. If you are a Jew, what is he going to do? Is he going to take me back to Jerusalem after he preaches the sermon?

Let us look at I Corinthians 15. Obviously, this is the resurrection chapter, but he mentions this in here that he saw Jesus resurrected.

I Corinthians 15:8-10 Then last of all, He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was in me.

Let us go I Timothy 1, because this was his attitude toward that. I told you about Peter probably not forgetting what he had done. I am sure the other apostles had their own forsaking of Christ hanging over their heads. But here is Paul, persecutor of the church, whom Christ called and turned and he had to live with this among the church, among the Jews in the church for the rest of his life.

I Timothy 1:12-15 And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and

an insolent man [The margin says violently arrogant.]; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

I sincerely believe that Paul sincerely believed that he was the worst person in the world. He was the chief of sinners. That was his mind. I do not think he was using hyperbole here. I think he really felt he was chief of sinners. He writes it here just in plain Greek, "of which I am chief." His own judgment of himself, which he did not trust but conceded to Christ (he mentions that in I Corinthians 4:3-4), was that he was not worth saving. To him, he was the wretched man of Romans the 7th chapter, who was only delivered from well deserved death by the grace of God by Christ. He says in that same chapter, Romans 7, that he knew in him, in his flesh, he said, nothing good dwelt. That is in verse 18. He lived in constant amazement and gratitude that God had called him and allowed him to work for His glory.

Now here we are, having seen the leaders of the early New Testament church, most or all of them with dark, maybe even some of them were kind of gray, but they were still skeletons in the closet. Even Jesus' brothers, having grown up with Him over how many years, did not believe. They only came forward, as I said earlier, after the resurrection. None of the early New Testament leaders could claim innocence, goodness, constancy, or perfect faith. They were all flawed, just as we are all flawed. And Paul does, at one point in I Corinthians 11:1, he says, "Imitate me." But remember the caveat that he puts at the end of that. The caveat is, "as I imitate Christ." He was not telling people to imitate him in his carnality, but imitate him in his spirituality as he looked like Christ.

That is the point of all of this. True ministers of God are not worthy of being followed or imitated in their behavior *except* in their likeness to Christ—the perfect One. We try to make a good example. We try to say the right things. We try to have good attitudes, but only as they match up with Jesus Christ are they to be followed. A true minister of God will not make himself the focus of a church or a work, but he will *always* defer to Christ as the focus, as the trunk of the tree. He will *always* point to him, *always* give Him the

credit and the thanks. A true minister of God knows and admits that without Him he could do nothing. Nothing that brings honor and glory to God and causes growth in what is good and right. That is the truth there in John 15:5. We cannot do anything good, right, spiritually worthy of the Kingdom of God, without Jesus Christ in it, backing it.

Colossians 1:24-29 [This same apostle Paul says] I now rejoice in my sufferings for you [because he was in jail], and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

See how he always points back to Christ—deflects to Christ, defers to Christ—because Christ is that mystery that has been revealed. Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Let us go back to Deuteronomy 30. We were here this morning. I want the other end of the chapter from where my dad was.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 [God says through Moses] "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing

and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may be obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

This is obviously an Old Testament passage but the teaching is New Testament. God still works this way with His people. Only the covenant has changed and the Promised Land is now the Kingdom of God. God's way, the life that we have been called to live, is still all about loving God, keeping His word, keeping His covenant, remaining true to Him, choosing life and acknowledging that He is our life. *He is central* to all we believe and do and hope for. He commands us here to cling to Him, implying that we are not to let Him go. Not for anything! We have to cling to Him like the ring they toss out to you when you are drowning in the ocean, cling to Him for all you are worth. If we let our grip weaken and we start grasping at other far less central and vital things, like other men and their ideas, that is when we put ourselves in grave spiritual danger.

Back to Colossians in chapter 3. Here is a new Testament parallel to what we just read in Deuteronomy.

Colossians 3:1-11 If then if then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore [now that we know all this, we have decided we are going to cling to Him] put to death your members which are on the earth [that earthy, carnal part of yourself]: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new

man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

So our job is to seek those heavenly things of Christ. Set your mind on them. They *must* be the focus of our lives, those heavenly things. The things of this earth mean little in the long run, mean little to eternity and the eternal life that we have with God, with Christ. Be zealous to remove leaven day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year. What I mean by that is all the time. Always be searching for the corruption that is still in us and remove it until the sinful self is gone, until it becomes a mere memory. And the new man looks just like Christ. As he says in the last verse here, Christ is all.

I just want to read to you the very last two verses of Jude.

Jude 24-25 Now to Him, who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.