

Chapter 12: The miracles and teaching of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The next time the three met, it was Xiao Wang who spoke first. “Professor Ho, I’ve been thinking about what you said last week—that Jesus is both God and a human being. I still can’t really understand it.” Xiao Wang hesitated a moment, then remembered that Professor Ho never seemed to be offended by his doubts, so he added: “I’m not even sure I believe it. But I have been reading the gospels, and it seems that Jesus was constantly doing miracles. I guess that makes sense if He was God! But one thing’s bothered me. It seems no one noticed He was God. And in fact, it seems like most of the Jewish people didn’t even believe He was the Messiah.”

“You’re exactly right Xiao Wang,” Professor Ho replied. “Most of them didn’t believe. But in point of fact, it wasn’t because they lacked evidence.”

“So you think they should have known He was God?”

“Not at the beginning,” Professor Ho admitted. “One of the striking things about Jesus Christ was how quietly He lived the first thirty odd years of His life. After the angel visitations at the beginning, there seem to have been no miracles until he began his ministry at the age of about thirty. Not many people knew about His miraculous conception; even the angel choir was only seen by a few shepherds. Joseph and Mary settled in Nazareth in Galilee, far north of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Apparently no one there had heard about the miracles surrounding His birth. He was simply regarded as the carpenter’s son, a peasant craftsman no different from others.

“The Bible makes it clear that Jesus never sinned. The people around Him, however, would not have been able to discern that He was completely sinless. Probably they simply felt that Jesus was a ‘good person.’

“Certainly there was nothing special in Jesus’s physical body to arouse attention and no obviously remarkable talent, except perhaps for His knowledge of the scriptures [Luke 2:46-47]. So after Jesus began performing miracles, his townspeople were amazed:

1 Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. 2 When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man *get* these things, and what is *this* wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? 3 "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. [Mark 6:1-3 NAS]

These two aspects—that Jesus was doubted and that there was nothing impressive in his outward appearance—were both predicted in the Old Testament:

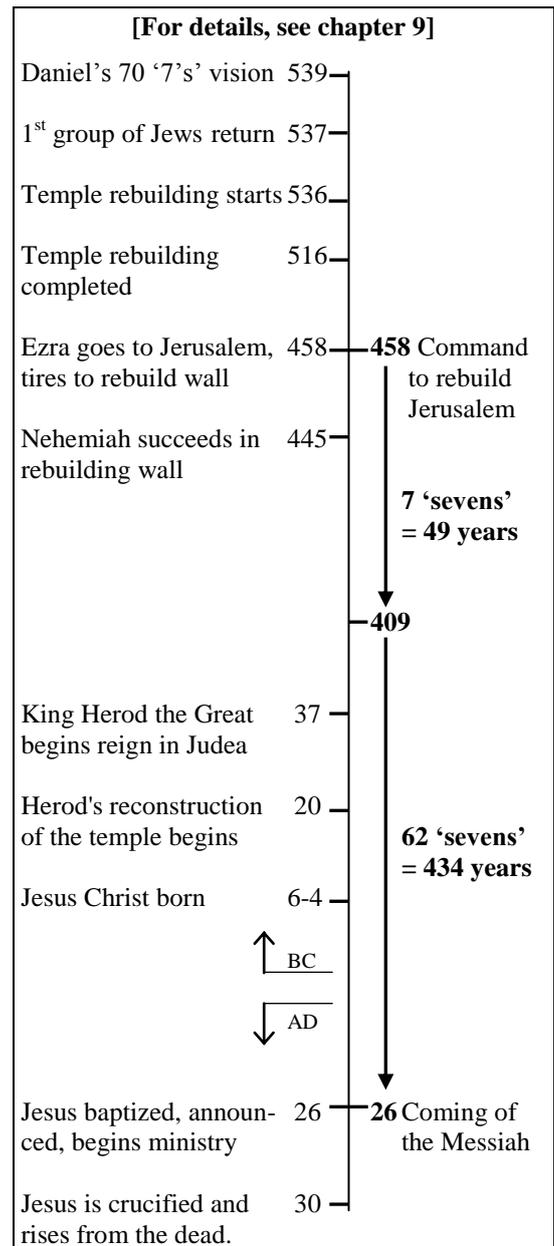
1 Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. [Isaiah 53:1-2 NAS]

“Why didn’t Jesus do some miracles earlier?” Xiao Wang wondered.

“Because the time had not yet come for Him to start His ministry and gain notoriety,” Professor Ho replied. “God knew Jesus would be rejected and crucified, and He arranged it to happen according to the carefully planned time-frame. You will recall, boys, that we saw how the timing of the coming of John the Baptist fulfilled God’s prophecy made through Daniel centuries earlier. [See chapter 9.] We also noted that John the Baptist’s activities were recorded by the non-Christian Jewish historian Josephus in the late first century AD.¹ [See chapter 10.]

“When the time came for Jesus to begin His ministry, John the Baptist was inspired by God as the last of the prophets to arise under the Mosaic covenant of the Old Testament. His message is summarized in the gospels.

1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came



<u>Rulers mentioned in Luke 3:1-2</u> (all dates AD unless otherwise noted)	
<u>Tiberius Caesar</u> :	
Co-regency over Roman provinces:	c.11—14
Sole reign after death of Augustus:	14—37
15 th year of co-regency:	c.26
<u>Pontius Pilate</u> , governor of Judea:	26—36
<u>Herod Antipas</u> , tetrarch of Galilee:	4BC—39AD
Herod <u>Philip I</u> , tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis:	4BC—34AD
<u>Lysanias</u> , tetrarch of Abilene: (dates uncertain but rule attested by archaeology)	
<u>Annas</u>	
functioned as high priest, recognized by Romans:	6—15
acknowledged by Jews:	6—30 or later
<u>Caiaphas</u> functioned as high priest:	18—36

to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. [Luke 3:1-2 NAS]

1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'" ... 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. ... 11 [John the Baptist said,] "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." [Matthew 3:1-3, 5-6, 11 NAS]

"John was clear that it was time for the Messiah to come. He was equally clear that the people of his day were not ready to meet Him! John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to preach repentance as a necessary condition both for forgiveness of sin and for being prepared to meet the Messiah. Most

of the people he was speaking to were very moral Jews, people who would never dare to commit an obvious sin like idolatry, theft, adultery, fornication or abortion. Nonetheless, they still had sins and needed to repent if they were going to receive the Messiah.

"John the Baptist's ministry had been predicted in the Old Testament. As Matthew notes [Matthew 3:3] He was the forerunner whom God had promised through Isaiah:

3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see *it* together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." [Isaiah 40:3-5 NAS]

In the ancient near east, just like in dynastic China, when a ruler was going to pass through a region, the roads were fixed in advance of his coming. In this case, the 'road' that needs to be smoothed out is human hearts, which are potholed and blocked with sin. People had to realize that they were sinners, otherwise they would not welcome a Messiah who came to bear the iniquity of the world. Fascinatingly, the ruler who is coming is said to be 'the LORD,' Yahweh Himself. Here again you see, even in the Old Testament, an indication of the Incarnation, the deity of Jesus. Meanwhile, there is a promise that 'the glory of the LORD' will be seen on earth, which was shown through Jesus's miracles and other deeds.

"A similar prediction was made some time before 400 BC by another Old Testament prophet, Malachi:

1 "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. [Malachi 3:1 NAS]

Here again, a forerunner is predicted, and here again the One who is to come after the forerunner will be God Himself. On the one hand, He is God's 'messenger of the covenant;' on the other hand, He is 'the Lord' Himself. God will send God! We talked about the Trinity last week. We see it here even more clearly in Jesus's baptism:

13 Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan *coming* to John, to be baptized by him. 14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" ... 16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him, 17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." [Matthew 3:13-14, 16-17 NAS]

Jesus is declared by God the Father to be His own Son. As I noted last week, a father and a son must be of the same species, so Jesus must be divine; He is God the Son. That's the deity of Jesus. At the same time, He is clearly a man. That's the humanity of Jesus. The two combined together are the Incarnation: Jesus is God become a man. Meanwhile, both the Old and New Testaments emphatically insist that there is only one God. So God the Father and God the Son, who are clearly differentiated, are still one God. So is God the Holy Spirit, who descends on Jesus at His baptism. That's the Trinity. I note this again today to point out that these two truths are taught throughout the New Testament: God is both three and one, and Jesus is both God and man."

"I still find that hard to understand," said Xiao Wang.

"So do I," admitted Professor Ho, "but I must leave it to God to reveal to me who He is, regardless of whether I can fully comprehend it."

“There’s something that always bothers me,” Xiao Li began. “I know Jesus is God. But why does He call Himself ‘the Son of Man’? It seems like the exact opposite of ‘Son of God.’ ”

“Not the opposite,” Professor Ho corrected, “but the complement. Jesus’s favorite way to refer to Himself in the gospels is ‘the Son of Man.’ It has two meanings. On the one hand, as the complement of the title ‘Son of God,’ ‘Son of Man’ emphasizes Jesus’s humanity. He really was ‘born of a woman’ [Galatians 4:4], a genuine human being. On the other hand, the title ‘Son of Man’ is part of an Old Testament prediction about Jesus’s second coming and the final judgment. It’s in the book of Daniel.” Professor Ho turned back to the Old Testament and read:

13 "I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. 14 "And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed. [Daniel 7:13-14 NAS]

“This is a prophecy about the Messiah, made by the prophet Daniel in about 553 BC. Note that His rule is predicted to be both universal, ‘all the peoples, nations,’ and eternal, ‘an everlasting dominion which will not pass away.’ This eternal ruler is ‘like a Son of Man’ because He is a real human being, but only ‘*like*’ because He is not an ordinary human, but is also God. Thus Jesus chose this Messianic title with a compound meaning to refer to Himself, both to affirm His humanity and to assert that He is the Messiah, the eternal ruler.

“Not long after Jesus’s baptism, He began His public ministry of teaching performing miracles.”

Jesus’s miracles: Done for compassion on people in need, to show He was Messiah, and to show He was God.

“Jesus’s miracles were done for at least three reasons. The first, obviously, was to help people in need. Jesus understands our human weakness and suffering and has a compassionate heart toward us! The second reason was to show that He is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. It was prophesied that Messiah would perform miracles. The third reason was to show His deity. He did things no ordinary human being could, and He usually did them without praying to God, but directly, through His own power.

The gospel records contain a careful selection of a small part of the many miracles Jesus performed during His three and a half year ministry. I’d like to look at a few of them with you to show Jesus’s power in four areas: over nature, demons, sickness, and death. I also want to look at His authority to forgive sins.”

Jesus’s power over nature

Professor Ho opened his Bible to the beginning of the New Testament and read from the second gospel:

35 ...He [Jesus] said to them [the twelve disciples], "Let us go over to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee]." 36 Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him. 37 And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. 38 Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" 39 And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. 40 And He said to them, "Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?" 41 They became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" [Mark 4:35-41 NAS]

Professor Ho looked up at the boys and asked, “Yes, who is this?”

“Let me set the scene for you. The Sea of Galilee is in a natural basin, surrounded by steep hills on most sides. Storms like the one mentioned here can spring up suddenly when weather changes cause winds to sweep rapidly down the hills and across the surface of the water. At least four of the people in the boat were seasoned fisherman with years of experience sailing on the Sea of Galilee. No doubt they’d been through plenty of storms, but this time they expected to sink and drown.

“Amazingly, Jesus is asleep—perhaps exhausted by sleepless nights taken up with ministry demands and prayer [compare Mark 1:32-35, 3:20-21]. After He is awakened, He simply speaks a word, and the storm immediately stops, and the lake becomes smooth as glass!”

“Couldn’t it of just have been good luck?” Xiao Wang asked.

“We might possibly hypothesize that the stopping of the wind could have been coincidental,” Professor Ho conceded, “though I think if you had been there to see it you wouldn’t have felt that way! But the record also notes that ‘it became perfectly calm.’ As you no doubt remember from wave mechanics in your Physics class, once waves begin in a liquid medium, they will continue to propagate for some time even after the initial source of motion, in this case the wind, is removed. In Jesus’s day, the Sea of Galilee was about 20 kilometers long and, at it’s widest extent, about 12 kilometers wide. It would have taken at least hours, and possibly days, for the waves churned up by the storm to subside. An *immediate* calm was miraculous.

“Note Jesus’s authority here. He did not pray to God; He directly address the physical phenomena and ordered them to change! At the beginning, the disciples were afraid of the storm; by the end, they were even more afraid, at the sight of One who could command nature.

“Just after He calmed the storm, Jesus did a miracle showing His power over the spiritual world.”

Jesus's power over demons

Professor Ho flipped back a few pages to the first gospel and read:

28 When He [Jesus] came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs. *They were* so extremely violent that no one could pass by that way. 29 And they cried out, saying, "What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?" 30 Now there was a herd of many swine feeding at a distance from them. 31 The demons *began* to entreat Him, saying, "If You *are going to* cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." 32 And He said to them, "Go!" And they came out and went into the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. 33 The herdsmen ran away, and went to the city and reported everything, including what had happened to the demoniacs. 34 And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw Him, they implored Him to leave their region. [Matthew 8:28-34 NAS]

"First a word about demons," Professor Ho began. "When the New Testament uses the term 'demon' or 'unclean spirit,' it is not referring to the soul of a dead person, nor to some mythical 'god' or semi-divine 'immortal.' Those are the meanings we would usually think of in Chinese, but these terms as used in the New Testament have a different meaning. The demons, including their leader Satan, seem to be fallen angels who chose to rebel against God [see Revelation 12:7-9]. They are definitely not the souls of human beings wandering around on earth. They are also definitely not 'gods.' They, like angels, have a great deal of supernatural power, but all of them, including Satan, are simply created beings. Satan is not the equal or opposite of God."

"Why do they want to possess people?" Xiao Li wondered.

"I'm not totally sure," admitted Professor Ho, "but it seems to be part of their general strategy of trying to deceive human beings. The account of this same event in Mark notes that a least one of the demoniacs had supernatural strength:

3 ...And no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain; 4 because he had often been bound with shackles and chains, and the chains had been torn apart by him and the shackles broken in pieces, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. 5 Constantly, night and day, he was screaming among the tombs and in the mountains, and gashing himself with stones. [Mark 5:3-5 NAS]

The region where this happened is specified in Matthew 8:28 as 'the country of the Gadarenes,' a non-Jewish region on the east coast of the Sea of Galilee occupied by idolaters. Apparently the demon's game was to show supernatural powers as a means of promoting belief in idols and superstitions. Idols and false gods can't answer prayers, curse people, or do anything—idols are dead matter, and false gods don't exist. But demons can do a things beyond human ability, and if they act in the name of idols or false gods, it would reinforce people's superstitious beliefs. The apostle Paul writes about that later in the New Testament." Professor Ho read from further on in his Bible:

2 You know that when you were pagans, *you were* led astray to the mute idols, however you were led. [1 Corinthians 12:2 NAS]

19 What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 *No*, but *I say* that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. [1 Corinthians 10:19-20 NAS]

Doubtless the people in the country of the Gadarenes were reinforced in their idolatrous and superstitious beliefs by the demoniacs' displays of superhuman strength."

Xiao Li cut in. "When my grandmother was dying in the countryside, my uncle went and consulted a medium in another village. She claimed to get in touch with my dead grandfather's ghost. She told my uncle all sorts of things about the family, things she couldn't possibly have known. My uncle had never seen her before!"

Professor Ho wrinkled his forehead. "To be honest, Xiao Li, I really can't credit most of these stories I hear. It would be an easy thing for a professional shyster to get a little information about the family background of a man from a neighboring village. Hucksters pull tricks like that all the time. Most fortunetellers are simply fakes."

"Yeah," said Xiao Wang in disgust, "stop being so superstitious!"

"But that's not all," Xiao Li persisted. "The medium also told my uncle what had happened that morning behind closed doors in the room where my grandmother was. She described all the details accurately, and even quoted the conversations. No one else could have known it!"

Professor Ho's expression changed. "If the medium really was able to report things which she could not have humanly known—I say, 'if'; you haven't given me enough details so I can't assess the evidence—but *if* what she did was really superhuman, then you have good evidence that there was a demon behind it. Demons are spirit beings and are apparently able to see what's going on anyplace on earth. They are able to communicate with human beings, which shouldn't be surprising since we ourselves have an immaterial spirit with interfaces with our material brain.

"We have an example of this kind of demonic activity in the record of the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul." Professor Ho turned back a few pages and read:

16 It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. 17 Following after Paul and us, she kept crying

out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." 18 She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment. 19 But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, [Acts 16:16-19 NAS]

This pitiable slave-girl really did have a demon afflicting her which enabled her to do fortune-telling. I have no reason to think the demons really could predict the future, but they could tell people details of their lives, or what was going on far away at that moment—remember, this was before telecommunications—or ‘predict’ events which they themselves were going to cause by one means or another. The demons could easily pose as one of the ‘gods’ worshipped by the local people, or as a visitation from a ghost, thus successfully reinforcing people’s superstitions. When the demon was driven out, the slave-girl’s furious owners found she had lost her ability—it hadn’t come from a ‘god’ or ghost.”

“How did she know Paul was a real servant of God?” Xiao Wang asked.

“Probably from the demon; you remember we just saw the Gadarene demons felt compelled to scream out an acknowledgment that Jesus was the Son of God. The demon in the slave-girl knew who Paul was and that God had sent him [see also Acts 19:15].”

Professor Ho flipped back to Matthew. “Let’s go back to the Gadarene demons. You’ll note here in Matthew 8:29 that the demons knew very well that Jesus was the Son of God. They realized He was more powerful than they and that they were at His mercy. Furthermore, they knew He was going to judge them one day and were afraid of it. Clearly Jesus had total authority over them.”

“If they know they’re going to lose, why are they still fighting against God?” Xiao Wang asked. “From all that you’ve told me about God’s judgment, continuing to sin can only increase their final punishment.”

“I suppose it will,” Professor Ho allowed, “but it’s not hard for me to understand why they continue to rebel anyway. They hate God, and they hate the fact that they are going to be defeated. But that doesn’t mean they’ll want to give in. They are like the Japanese soldiers on Pacific islands occupied by the Americans in the last days of World War II. There were only a few of them left and they’d run out of ammunition. They knew that they couldn’t do anything that would really make an impact against the enemy. But most of them were too proud to surrender. Instead, they sharpened up sticks and attacked against machine guns, or laid down on the beach and played dead, then tried to jump up and kill an unsuspecting enemy soldier with a knife. They would rather die fighting fruitlessly than live by giving in to the enemy. We might be tempted to admire their spirit, but remember their cause was evil and they brought death and suffering to millions, not only in China, but all over east and southeast Asia.

“The demons are like them. Filled with hate and despair, they’ll lash out against God in any way they can. The only thing they can really do against God is to tempt human beings, whom God loves, to commit sin against Him. When humans sin, they hurt God’s heart, and the demons might feel that they’re gaining some revenge.

“The main lesson to be learned from the Gadarene demoniacs is that Jesus, the Son of God, has complete power over the demons.

“When Jesus crossed back to the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, He showed His power over sickness and His right to forgive sins.”

Jesus’s power over sickness and authority to forgive sins

Professor Ho continued reading from the gospel of Matthew.

1 When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. 2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them. 3 And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. 4 Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. 5 And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? 9 "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk'? 10 "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- He said to the paralytic, 11 "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home." 12 And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this." [Mark 2:1-12 NAS]

“This event happened in the second full year of Jesus’s ministry. By this point Jesus’s reputation as a miraculous healer was already widespread. Thus the paralyzed man and his friends are willing to undertake a difficult journey and tear open a roof to get to Jesus.”

“If the paralyzed man came for healing,” Xiao Wang asked, “why does Jesus first say to him, ‘your sins are forgiven’?”

“Exactly!” Professor affirmed. “Why? In the account, the healing almost seems incidental, a secondary matter to both Jesus and the paralytic. To understand this, we need to consider the Old Testament background.

“Under the Mosaic covenant, God promised to bless the Jews if they obeyed and punish them if they disobeyed.

These were specifically physical blessings, such as health and prosperity, and physical curses, like sickness and military defeat.^A Much of this promise seems to have been corporate, blessing or cursing on the nation as a whole in accordance with their ‘average level of obedience,’ as it were. At the same time, there were at least some indications in the Old Testament that individuals would be punished for their individual sins.^B This caused many Jews to make an excessive identification between an individual’s righteousness and his physical condition. Prosperous Jews who were at least ordinarily pious were thought to have God’s approval and blessing. Severe and long term illness, such as the paralytic was suffering, was seen as judgment for sins—for hidden sins, when there were no obvious ones.

“Thus we can see why the paralytic would have been concerned that his suffering was a punishment for sin, even if he wasn’t aware of any blatant or unrepented wickedness. Of course, it’s also possible that he really had committed some gross breach of morality and Old Testament law and subsequently became paralyzed. In either case, the paralytic would have feared that he was experiencing God’s wrath. Jesus understood his heart and gave him what he wanted most: the assurance that his sins were forgiven.”

“So do you think the paralyzed man really was being punished for his sin?” Xiao Li asked.

“I don’t know,” Professor Ho replied, “the text doesn’t give us enough details to answer that question. I do know, however, that the New Testament gives clear examples of sickness and handicap in the lives of believers that are *not* punishment for sin. The apostle Paul himself was subject to a ‘thorn in the flesh’ that God allowed not as discipline for sin but to keep him from becoming proud [2Corinthians 12:7]. And Paul’s beloved, faithful helper Timothy got sick so often that Paul advised him:

23 No longer drink water *exclusively*, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. [1Timothy 5:23 NAS]

Notice he doesn’t say, ‘stop sinning so much; that’s why your digestion is bad!’ Instead, he suggests such medical treatment as was available at the time.^C

“I don’t know if the paralyzed man really was suffering as a discipline for his sins, but I do know the basis on which his sins were forgiven: faith in Jesus. In Mark 2:5 Jesus sees his faith and for that reason assures him ‘your sins are forgiven.’ This is the only way we can have our sins forgiven: through faith, by grace. You might remember boys—I hope you do!—that we saw it with Abraham all the way back near the beginning of the Bible:

6 Then he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. [Genesis 15:6 NAS]

The paralytic was forgiven his sins because he believed in Jesus. His faith was shown by his action in undertaking what was almost certainly a difficult, painful trip and by refusing to turn back despite the obstacle of the crowd.”

“But Professor Ho, why does it say ‘seeing *their* faith’?” Xiao Wang wondered. “Whose faith got forgiveness for the paralytic? And after all, it was his friends who took him to Jesus. What faith did the paralytic show?”

“I’ve wondered the same thing,” Professor Ho replied. “It’s clear the four friends of the paralytics had faith in Jesus’s ability to heal. You might carry your pitiable friend to the teacher on a mat to humor him, but you probably wouldn’t start tearing a hole in a stranger’s roof while a crowd watched if you didn’t think the Man inside could do something! But the paralytic must have had faith, too. There’s no reason to think he couldn’t talk. Going to see Jesus must have been undertaken with his consent, and probably at his urging. So the word ‘their’ includes the paralytic, and it is the paralytic’s faith which gains him forgiveness of sins.

“What’s most fascinating here, though, is how Jesus pronounces that forgiveness. He simply says it: ‘your sins are forgiven.’ Some scribes, Jews who copied and interpreted the Old Testament, were shocked because they felt that Jesus was pronouncing forgiveness on His own authority. And they were right; He was! They felt it would be blasphemous for a human being to arrogate to himself the right to forgive sins. And they were right about that, too! But Jesus knew that He wasn’t just a human being.”

“But, Professor Ho,” Xiao Wang interposed, “I’ve read a little of the Old Testament and I’m almost sure I remember prophets saying people were forgiven....”

“They did,” Professor Ho agreed. “But *how* they did it provides an instructive contrast with Jesus’s words to the paralytic. Take one of the great examples. After King David committed murder and adultery, the prophet Nathan confronts him about his sin. David confesses and repents, and Nathan announces, obviously based on a revelation from God, that God has forgiven him:

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. [2Samuel 12:13 NAS]

Nathan says *God* has forgiven David; he doesn’t presume to announce forgiveness on his own steam! The standard formula of the Old Testament prophet is ‘thus says the LORD;’ Nathan uses it two times in his conversation with David just before he says he has been forgiven [2Samuel 12:7, 11]. But Jesus says nothing like that; He forgives on His own authority.

^A See, for example, Deuteronomy 28.

^B See, for example, Leviticus 17:10, 20:1-6.

^C Paul’s advice was reasonable. In the ancient world, especially in winter, the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables had the potential to lead to vitamin deficiencies which would impair the immune system. A small amount of wine would provide vitamin C, preventing a deficiency.

“Of course Jesus knew this would be hard for them to accept, so He offers proof that He has this kind of authority: He performs an indisputable miracle in front of everyone. Without medicine, without even touching the man, Jesus both heals his paralysis and restores his probably atrophied and contracted muscles in an instant.

“Here again, Jesus does not pray and ask God to perform a miracle the way a human being might; He just does it Himself. As far as I know, there’s only one place in the gospels where Jesus prays before He performs a miracle. When He heals the paralytic here, Jesus doesn’t even say He doing it in the name of the LORD. He just announces it: ‘I say to you.’ Jesus heals based on His own, inherent power and authority.”

Jesus’s power over death

“Jesus’s stilling of the wind and the waves and His hundreds of healings were impressive. So were His other miracles, like feeding thousands of people with a few loaves and fishes [Mark 6:34-44, 8:1-9, 8:19-20], or turning water into wine [John 2:1-11]. But the most impressive miracles during His ministry were the raising of the dead, which He did at least three times.”

Professor Ho turned back to the New Testament section of his Bible. “Let’s consider one incident which was witnessed by a large crowd. During the last year of Jesus’s ministry, a man named Lazarus in the town of Bethany died of an illness. Four days after his death, Jesus arrived and raised him:

18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning *their* brother [Lazarus]. ... 38 So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been *dead* four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" 41 So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 "I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me." 43 When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." 44 The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." 45 Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. [John 11:18-19, 38-45 NAS]

Note the details: Lazarus had been in the grave for about four days. The tomb was either a natural cave, or one cut into a rock. According to the burial customs of the rich, he was tied up in cloths wound around his body, with another cloth completely covering his head. A massive stone sealed the tomb. Are we to imagine that they accidentally buried a still living man, and didn’t notice while they washed the body and wrapped it for burial? If such an absurdity is hypothesized, are we further to believe that this nearly dead man—a man whose breathing could no longer be detected—would still be alive after four days tied up, laid on a rock in cave? And that he would then be strong enough to walk or crawl out of the tomb, still tied up?

“The people who witnessed Lazarus’s resuscitation were a sizable crowd, and included those who had known him best and prepared him for burial. Of course the news would have immediately spread throughout the village and to anyone else who had known Lazarus. Lots of people investigated and it was the talk of the region. This testimony to Jesus’s supernatural power was so effective that when Jesus’s enemies were plotting to kill Him, they decided they needed to get rid of Lazarus, too. A few months later, just before Jesus died:

1 Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ... 9 The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. 10 But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus. [John 12:1, 9-11 NAS]

That Jesus had raised people from the dead was widely known and powerfully persuasive to the Jews of His day.”

“Then why didn’t the chief priests and other religious leaders believe in Him?” Xiao Wang asked.

“Yes, it seems surprising, doesn’t it?” replied Professor Ho. “But actually it’s easy to understand. The majority of the chief priests and Pharisees and scribes of Jesus’s day were exactly like the evolutionists of our day. The truth was there, staring them in the face, but it was a truth that they didn’t want to acknowledge. The evolutionists today have the findings of biochemistry and statistics telling them: ‘you couldn’t get a single, specified protein by chance in a billion years, much less a living cell or a new structure in an organism’ [see chapter 1]. But they don’t want to let go of their preconceived notions and their atheism. So the evolutionists deal with the evidence by blackballing the creationists as ‘anti-science,’ shutting them out of academic positions and publication in scientific journals. In Jesus’s day, His most implacable enemies, the Pharisees, had overwhelming testimony to His miracles, and even saw some of them themselves. But Jesus’s teaching exposed their hypocrisy, and they weren’t willing to let go of their self-righteousness and religious traditions. So they claimed that Jesus was ‘anti-God’ and did His miracles by the power of the devil:

22 The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul [i.e., Satan], and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." [Mark 3:22 NAS]

That was the calumny of Jesus’s enemies. But then as now, those who seek the truth find it. And for thousands of Jews, Jesus’s raising of the dead was a powerful confirmation that He really was the Messiah.”

Miracles demonstrated that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah

“Miracles alone were not sufficient to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, but they were necessary to prove it. The Old Testament had predicted that the Messiah would do wonders in Israel. All the Jews understood this.

“After John the Baptist announced and baptized Jesus, he was imprisoned by Herod Antipas. Sitting in prison, John began to be discouraged. Since Jesus was the Messiah, why wasn’t He immediately establishing His rule over Israel—and getting John out of prison! John knew Jesus had been sent by God, but he began to wonder if He was the Messiah. He couldn’t go and ask himself, so he sent a delegation:

2 Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent *word* by his disciples 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" 4 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 *the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.* 6 "And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me." [Matthew 11:2-6 NAS]

Jesus’s reply to John pointed out the things He was doing: healing, raising the dead, and preaching the gospel. Jesus knew that John knew the Old Testament predictions about the Messiah—like the ones in Isaiah.” Professor Ho turned to the middle of his Bible and read:

4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. ... [Isaiah 35:4-6 NAS]

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news [i.e. the gospel] to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; [Isaiah 61:1 NAS]

Jesus’s miracles fulfilled these and other Old Testament predictions about the Messiah. Without them, no Jew with any knowledge of the scriptures could have been convinced to believe in Him.”

Miracles show God’s final purpose of removing all suffering in the world

“Finally, Jesus’s miracles give us a window into the heart of God. They show us His compassion for us in our physical suffering. Again and again in the gospels we find Jesus moved with compassion and sorrow at the sight of human suffering and death. And again and again He brings healing and relief, showing us that God *does* care about our pain, just like He said through Jeremiah:

31 For the Lord will not reject forever, 32 for if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness. 33 For He does not afflict willingly or grieve the sons of men. [Lamentations 3:31-33 NAS]

God’s heart intention has never been to simply let us suffer. Jesus’s miracles show us that.”

“But God caused—or at least allowed—all that suffering in the first place by cursing the earth,” Xiao Wang objected.

“We must remember,” Professor Ho replied gravely, “that when Adam and Eve sinned, God really had no choice but to curse the physical world, limiting humans’ lifetimes and their opportunity to sin, to harm others, and to degenerate into ever greater evil.”

“He could have just killed Adam and Eve and spared all the rest of us,” countered Xiao Wang, sounding for a moment very much like his old, combative self.

“Yes, He could have,” Professor Ho conceded, “but that would have meant depriving believers of an eternity of joy simply because unbelievers would refuse to accept the gift of eternal life. Would that have been reasonable? Or fair? It would have amounted to letting Satan win, and letting those who reject God’s grace have the final word for all of humanity.”

Xiao Wang was silent.

“No,” Professor Ho continued, “God was merciful in allowing humanity to continue after the Fall, but limiting evil by cursing the earth. At the same time, that very curse would prepare the way for redemption from the curse: God the Son would become a human being and die, and by that act triumph over sin and suffering and death. From the very beginning of cursing the universe, God was preparing both the redemption of all who would believe, and the restoration of the sub-human creation to it’s original ‘very good’ [Genesis 1:31] state.

20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. [Romans 8:20-21 NAS]

Our bodies being ‘subjected to futility’—suffering, decay, death—was not done simply because God was angry or callous, but in the hopeful expectation of redemption and restoration. Jesus’s three and a half years of ministry was meant to give a limited, partial foretaste of the joys and powers of the future kingdom of God, the new heavens and new earth. It shows that God does care about human suffering on earth and has a plan to end it.”

“But then why didn’t Jesus heal everyone?” Xiao Li asked.

Professor Ho was a little surprised. “But He did heal everyone who came to Him with even a modicum of faith, both Jews and Gentiles. And He travelled all over, making Himself accessible to people.”

“But He could have started sooner,” Xiao Li persisted.

“The timing was not random,” Professor Ho replied. “Jesus knew that He was bound to be opposed and eventually killed. He wouldn’t have even lasted three and half years if He hadn’t been careful!^D No, the time was carefully chosen, and it was long enough both to show God’s heart of compassion and to give evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. After that, He had to go to the bitterness of the cross to be able to completely free us from sin and suffering.

“Jesus’s miracles demonstrated who He was: God come to earth as a real human being. What did God want to say to us? Jesus’s teaching tells us. I’d like to turn now, boys, to look at some selections from Jesus’s teachings recorded in the gospels.”

[Here it is suggested that the reader read Matthew chapter 5.]

Jesus’s teaching: The Beatitudes

“One of the most famous lectures Jesus ever gave is known as the Sermon on the Mount. It was especially addressed to those who said they were willing to be His disciples, willing to follow Him. It opens with a section called the Beatitudes, in which Jesus makes a series of eight statements which are often surprising and even counterintuitive.”

Professor Ho turned back to the beginning of the New Testament and read:

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and *began* to teach them, saying, 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. [Matthew 5:1-12 NAS]

Professor Ho looked up from his reading, his eyebrows knit together. “Even a cursory glance at this section shows us Jesus’s viewpoint about what matters in life is radically different from what we usually think.” Professor Ho took a folded sheet from that page of his Bible and opened it on the desk in front of the boys. “Note these points of contrast:

The People Jesus Said are Blessed:

1. poor in spirit
2. mourners (probably mourning their own sin)
3. hungry and thirsty for righteousness
4. gentle
5. merciful
6. pure in heart
7. peacemakers
8. persecuted for righteousness

The People Society Says are Blessed:

1. self-confident
2. happy, full of respect and admiration for themselves
3. assertive, ambitious, insist on their rights
4. seeking money, status, fame, pleasure
5. take care of themselves first
6. not too naïve, too idealistic
7. winners in fights
8. avoid suffering

“The first item, ‘poor in spirit,’ needs some explanation. The person who is ‘poor in spirit’ is not necessarily depressed or a weakling. The real issue here is a realistic humility about one’s status as a sinner deserving wrath, and only able to stand by God’s grace. The opposite of ‘poor in spirit’ is ‘rich in pride!’ Many of the Pharisees and other highly religious people of Jesus’s day were proud that way. But even today, a proud self-satisfaction with one’s moral state is the common condition of humanity.

“Of course our modern Chinese society has been saying for several decades now that what we need above all else is self-confidence. Lack of self-confidence is the root of all our problems! Just believe in yourself, and all will be well—no matter how morally bad your conduct is! I think we learned that nonsense from Western psychology. But then again, it fits with the natural attitude of a sinners from any country. The essential attitude is: there’s nothing wrong with me; I’m good! But Jesus says that attitude will keep us out of heaven and send us to hell. The fact is, we are *not* good people, and recognition of our spiritual poverty is the first step on the road to forgiveness from God and acceptance into the kingdom of heaven.

“That leads right into the second beatitude: ‘blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.’ This certainly seems like a contradiction, because people who mourn do it because they are suffering, not because they are blessed. And certainly not all of them are eventually comforted. Some are bitter and pained for life.”

“Does He mean later on, in heaven?” Xiao Wang wondered.

“Not really,” said Professor Ho. “The fact is, most of the people who mourn on earth will not be going to heaven.

No, there’s only one kind of person who has the potential to be blessed because he mourns: the person who is mourning

^D See, for example, John 7:1, 8:59, 10:31, 10:39, 11:7-8; Luke 4:28-30, 13:31-33.

over his own sin. You see it relates to the first beatitude, ‘poor in spirit.’ This is the picture of the repentant person who has begun to feel the gravity of his sins against God and against people. He is grieved over what he has done, mourning about it. That person is in a position to receive comfort from God, the comfort of knowing his sins have been forgiven by grace through faith, forgiven and cleansed because Jesus has died in his place!”

Xiao Wang looked sober. Xiao Li felt a little choke in his throat as he remembered some of the things he had done, and how he had felt when he realized God really had forgiven him.

Professor Ho continued. “Society in general can’t understand this attitude of mourning over sin. Oh, they might think it appropriate for some nasty criminal to be contrite about his crimes. But that’s actually rarely seen, and it won’t necessarily lead to any blessing. Even more to the point, most people think it’s ridiculous for Christians to always be going around long faced when they sin, all worried about some petty matter like having told a little lie, or taken a few office supplies from their company, or cheated on a test, or lost their temper—or having had sex with someone they weren’t married to, or having aborted their child! Christians are too hyper-sensitive! Life is short, and you should try to be happy. And you need to think well of yourself. Overlook your ‘little mistakes’ and get on with life!

“But the result is, one day they’ll have to face all their sins at God’s judgment seat. And there’ll be absolutely no comfort for them at that point, none, forever.

“The third beatitude, ‘blessed are the gentle,’ contains a term that’s difficult to accurately express with just one word in Chinese. The ‘gentle’ person has recognized that he is a sinner against God who stands only by His grace. Therefore he is truly humble. In his interactions with others, he will never assert himself in a way which might harm others, or make it difficult for them to believe in Jesus. If his rights are trampled on, or people take advantage of him, he might try to rectify the situation, but always with gentleness, recognizing that whatever bad things happen to him on this earth are far less than the punishment he deserves from God.

“No matter how you understand the term, this attitude also doesn’t fit with what society says will be blessed. Gentleness may be appreciated, and even admired. But according to society, it’s the assertive, aggressive person, the ‘go-getter’ who insists on his or her ‘rights’ who will be blessed. That’s the person who will get ahead in life. And often it’s at the price of trampling on others.

“Amazingly, Jesus says it’s the ‘gentle’ person who will ‘inherit the earth.’ The word ‘earth’ here may refer to the promised land of Canaan, or it might possibly mean the entire world. In any case, it’s certainly not what can be expected to happen in this life. It’s a promise that looks forward to the new heavens and new earth, which believers will inherit after the final judgment. Here again, the blessing that will come is by God’s grace.

“The next blessing makes it even clearer that our main concern must be with obtaining righteous. Those who ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’ are people who long above all else to be approved by the holy and loving God because He sees that they themselves have become holy and loving. Here again it’s obvious that we sinners can only hope to attain a status like that by grace through faith. But if we repent and believe in Jesus, this longing will be ‘satisfied,’ because God can and does give us righteousness as a free gift, the righteousness of Jesus applied to our accounts, as though we had been righteous all our lives as He was. After receiving that imputed righteousness, we then ‘hunger and thirst’ to live righteously in this life, reflecting God’s goodness and love in our own actions.

“Of course, the people of the world can’t understand this one at all. The world seeks for money, power, position, fame, sensual or intellectual pleasure. It considers the people who have these to be ‘blessed.’ Sometimes some people will be concerned about maintaining a good conscience, but half the time even that is for pride’s sake; if they can’t leave a name that will be fragrant, at least they don’t want one that will stink for a thousand years! But fully sharing God’s righteousness is not the concern of people in society.

“The next blessing is for the ‘merciful.’ This character trait grows in a disciple of Jesus because he realizes God has been merciful to him, so he should be so to others. The merciful person cares about the needs of others. This includes both actively doing what one can to help others, and forgiving others their offenses against you. Those who hope to receive mercy from God—above all, compassion for them in their sin and a way of forgiveness—must be merciful to others. It’s similar to what Jesus says in the very next chapter:

9 "Pray, then, in this way: ... 12 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ... 14 "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 "But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. [Matthew 6:9, 12, 14-15 NAS]

“Of course, the world thinks very differently. It’s O.K. to be merciful to others, up to a point. But people need to take care of themselves first! Mercy to others that interferes with one’s own interests might be admired in society—but it’s usually admired from a safe distance! Forgiveness is good, too—as long as the offense wasn’t too severe or repeated too often. With no understanding of God’s mercy to them, it’s difficult for the people of the world to be consistently or sacrificially merciful to others.

“The next blessing is uniquely Christian. The ‘pure in heart’ will ‘see God.’

“Here again, on the one hand, purity of heart can only come as a free gift from God, by the application of the blood of Jesus to our hearts to cleanse us of our sins. On the other hand, a pure heart is what a Christian will always strive for, a heart that is doing the right thing from the right motives, a heart devoted to God. A heart whose very thoughts are always pleasing and acceptable to God, free from anything impure. A heart like that is what every Christian desires to have.

“As a result, we can ‘see God.’ We’ll be allowed to see Him face to face with perfect clarity later in heaven. But even now we can ‘see’ Him in part. We can have interaction with Him. He hears us and He speaks to us. Of course, if

a Christian sins, that fellowship is obstructed until he confesses and repents; a pure heart is necessary for ongoing fellowship with God.

“The people of the world are not particularly concerned with purity of heart and conduct. ‘After all, people aren’t saints,’ they say. You can’t be too idealistic in this world, too naïve. You have to be willing to compromise your moral principles once in a while if you want to get ahead. As for your motives—well, everyone is naturally selfish! And who doesn’t have a little hatred or jealousy or lust in his heart?”

“Of course, the people of the world aren’t even interested in seeing God. They regard it as a joke. Do you remember, Xiao Wang, the first time we met? You said to me ‘Show me God, and I’ll believe in Him right away!’”

Xiao Wang dropped his eyes and blushed to remember his ignorant sarcasm. “I didn’t understand then!” he said defensively.

“I know,” Professor Ho nodded understandingly. “I’m not trying to criticize you. But the fact is, most people aren’t interested in seeing and knowing God, even if He really does exist.

“The next beatitude promises that the ‘peacemakers’ will be called ‘sons of God.’ The implication is that God Himself is a peacemaker. He has made peace between Himself and us twisted rebels at the cost of crucifying His own Son. Christians, then, who are His children, should be trying to make peace. The first and greatest part of this is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone can reconcile sinners to God. In addition, we must keep the peace within the Church, and even try to make peace among other human beings and nations whenever possible.

“Society might appreciate a peacemaker sometimes. But often they are so intent on gaining their own selfish ends or so enthralled in their own hatreds that they actually resent efforts at peacemaking. If you’ve ever tried to mediate a family quarrel or reconcile an estranged husband and wife, you’ll know this! To be honest, the people that society really admires are the ones who come out on top in a fight.

“The last beatitude is the most insane of them all in the estimation of the people of the world who don’t know Jesus. Blessed are those who are persecuted, insulted, slandered for righteousness sake. This will result in obtaining the kingdom of heaven—not as a result of works, but because those who endure this really and truly for Christ’s sake are those who have already been born again and belong to Him. Not only that, but there will be specific reward in heaven for this suffering.”

“They get a bigger crown!” said Xiao Li.

“Yes—and yet no,” replied Professor Ho. “The reward is doubtless not a literal hunk of gold weighing down your head, but rather the eternal glory of having God’s appreciation for what you have endured for His sake. You’ll hear ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’ [Matthew 25:21]. Thus the Christian suffering slander or imprisonment, even torture or death, is being blessed by gaining eternal rewards. Here again we see clearly that the blessings Jesus promises are spiritual. They mostly don’t have to do with the things of this earth and this life. But they are nonetheless real and, unlike earthly blessings, they are eternal.

“This eighth ‘blessing’ is one most people would rather do without! Of course the world will admit that you might have to suffer in a just cause; Confucius himself said ‘the virtuous man is willing to sacrifice and die for the sake of virtue.’ But in general, the world regards the person who *avoids* suffering as ‘blessed,’ not the person who has to undergo persecution.

“Well Xiao Wang, there’s Jesus summary of the ‘blessed’ life. What do you think?”

“It’s pretty obvious Jesus looked at things differently from most people,” Xiao Wang replied.

“Yes! And why?”

“Because He knew our souls will live forever.”

“Exactly!” Professor Ho agreed. “That’s the crux of Jesus’s teaching here, and the bedrock of His worldview. Jesus constantly emphasized that this world and this life are not all that there is, the next life lasts forever, and what we do here determines how we’ll wind up there.” Professor Ho quoted from memory:

“10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. [2 Corinthians 5:10 NAS]

Everyone must stand before Jesus Christ, God the Son, for judgment. For the unbelievers, it will be a judgment to determine punishment. For believers, it will be a judgment to determine rewards for service. The Beatitudes only make sense in light of eternity; but we are, in fact, eternal beings.

“Jesus went on after the Beatitudes to contrast God’s real standards with the standards held by most religious Jews in His day.

Jesus’s teaching: The real meaning of the Old Testament law

“The Jews in Jesus’s day were probably the most moral people in the world at that time. Throughout the rest of the Roman Empire, prostitution, concubinage, casual divorce, exposure of unwanted infants, cheating in business, cruelty to slaves, and a host of other vices were not only commonly practiced but for the most part accepted as a matter of course. But most of the Jews lived to a much higher standard, obeying the Ten Commandments and the other rules of the Old Testament—at least outwardly.

“Comparing themselves to the peoples around them, the Jews were tempted to a self-satisfied sense of superiority: ‘We are not like the pagans; we are good people, people whom God approves of.’ [See Galatians 2:15.] They tended to feel that as long as they conformed to the outward requirements of Moses’s Law, they would be acceptable to God and headed for heaven.

“But Jesus opened up the real meaning of the Old Testament laws in a way that exposed the sin in their lives—and ultimately drove them to put Him to death.

“The rules of the Old Testament can be divided into three types: ceremonial, civil, and moral. The ceremonial law, like offering sacrifices and not eating pork, was only symbolic. It taught important truths through those symbols, but it was not inherently moral; that is, it was not a reflection of God’s intrinsic moral character. The civil law was the government code for the nation of Israel. There was never a time when all the Jews were real believers in Yahweh, so there had to be civil penalties for murder, theft and other violations of human rights. These reflect the righteousness of God in some measure and we can extrapolate principles of justice from them, but they aren’t designed to show all of God’s standards of morality for daily human life, and some of them are specific to the economic and cultural situation faced by the Jews. The third category, the moral law, shows us God’s heart and what He demands of all human beings at all times. It was this moral law that Jesus expounded in the next section of the Sermon on the Mount.”

Professor Ho pointed to a verse in the Bible open on his desk. “Jesus begins by affirming the enduring significance of the Old Testament:

17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. [Matthew 5:17 NAS]

“The phrase ‘the Law or the Prophets’ here indicates the entire Old Testament. Note first of all that Jesus adamantly disclaims any abrogation of the moral law of Old Testament. He is not going to abolish it, but ‘fulfill’ it.”

“But I thought Jesus did away with the rituals of Moses’s Law,” Xiao Li interrupted.

“He did,” agreed Professor Ho, “but He did so by fulfilling their symbolic meaning. The entire Mosaic sacrificial system was just a picture. The picture was actualized in Jesus’s sacrificial death. But it’s the moral law that Jesus primarily has in view here. He’s going to ‘fulfill’ that by keeping it perfectly. But He’s also going to ‘fulfill’ it by teaching His followers what the full scope of it’s demands really is. Here Jesus shows that it was much more searching than most Jews of His day realized. In the following section Jesus will quote an Old Testament teaching introduced by a phrase like ‘you have heard that it was said,’ and then immediately follow it up with ‘but I say to you.’ In Jesus’s additions, He does not really add to the Old Testament teaching so much as explain it’s full application.

The heart: Do not hate

“He starts with what might have seemed like an easy rule to fulfill: do not murder.

21 " You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell. 23 "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. [Matthew 5:21-24 NAS; quoting Exodus 20:13]

“Here is a remarkable extension of commonly acknowledged morality. Most people in the world don’t think that they are ‘bad’ people; after all, we haven’t committed murder or some other really ‘bad’ crime! But here Jesus extends it to our heart attitude and our words toward others.”

Xiao Wang was puzzled. “But then I’m certainly going to hell! And so is almost everybody else I know!”

Professor Ho nodded with a completely serious look on his face. “That’s the case—apart from God’s forgiveness. But you probably think Jesus’s standard is too extreme.”

“Yes...”

“I can see why you’d feel that way. But what He’s really saying is, your heart matters, not just your outward actions. Calling somebody a ‘good-for-nothing’ or a ‘fool’ is a hateful outburst of anger. It’s designed to cause pain in the other person’s heart—and it usually succeeds! That hateful desire to hurt someone else, to make them feel pain, is a denial of their significance as a human being. It is an offense against the image of God in them, and therefore an offense against the God who made them and loves them. You know how angry you would feel if, say, you had a little sister in middle school and some boy in her class called her a fat pig. That anger is the faintest echo of how God feels when we hate and hurt each other—even if it’s ‘just with words.’

“But it goes even deeper than that. The heart attitude behind bitter anger and cruel words is hatred. It’s that same heart attitude which leads to murder. The actions are different, but the heart motive is the same: ‘I hate you, and I want to cause you pain.’ When the conditions are right, it leads to open insults or punches or killing. Even if no action is taken, because we don’t dare to openly vent our hatred, it’s still the same heart attitude. We wish the person wasn’t in this world; we are murdering him or her in our hearts. Jesus says it’s not enough to refrain from actual murder; we need to remove the hatred from our hearts before we can be acceptable to God.”

The heart: Do not lust

“In the next section Jesus covers another area where the problems begin in the heart.

27 " You have heard that it was said, ' YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; 28 but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of

your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. [Matthew 5:27-30 NAS; quoting Exodus 20:14]

Even our depraved age still understands that adultery is wrong, an offense against one's spouse. Of course, God forbids it in the Ten Commandments, which Jesus quotes here, and the pious Jews of Jesus's time wouldn't have dreamed of doing it. But maybe I spoke too soon, because it's exactly the 'dreaming' part that Jesus tells us is forbidden by God."

Xiao Wang objected. "But that's unreasonable! It's only a natural reaction to feel attracted to a beautiful woman."

"Perhaps," countered Professor Ho, "and it's only 'natural' for sinners to punch people when they're angry at them—but that doesn't make it right! But two words in what you just said need to be examined: 'attracted' and 'beautiful.' Jesus wasn't talking about Platonic attraction to an ideally beautiful human form! Jesus meant sexual arousal at the sight of someone's body. Try replacing your words 'attracted' and 'beautiful' with 'lust' and 'flesh.' What lust really amounts to is looking at a woman as though she were a hunk of meat existing to gratify your appetite. It debases her and offends against the image of God in her."

"But they dress so provocatively!" Xiao Wang complained.

"Yes, that's *her* sin," Professor Ho agreed, "though surprisingly often a woman does it in ignorance of how it really makes a man feel. But choosing to think about her body is *your* sin. I often put it this way: when an immodestly dressed woman comes into your view, the first half-second of looking at her isn't your fault; the second half-second *is* your fault, if you don't get your eyes and your mind off her."

"Why is Jesus so strict here?" Xiao Wang persisted. "I can look and even daydream without actually doing anything." The idea that he might have to control all his sexual thoughts was both irritating and depressing.

Professor Ho shook his head. "As I just said, looking at a woman like that debases her into an object for your gratification. That's already a sin. Furthermore, daydreaming about an act that is sinful, like sex with a woman who is not your wife, is already a form of rebellion against God's rules, just like daydreaming about murder would be. But it doesn't stop there. Just like hatred tends to lead to insults or punching someone or even murder, indulging lustful thoughts in our hearts inevitably tends to lead us into sexually immoral actions. That should be obvious! If no one ever permitted lust in their *minds*, there would be no fornication or adultery with their *bodies*."

"Of course, although Jesus states the case in terms of a man lusting after a woman, the same thing applies to women with regards to men."

Tear out your eye?

Xiao Wang was looking at the text again. "Does He really mean it here when He says 'tear out your eye'?"

Professor Ho gave him a funny look and replied "Yes, of course—and no, of course not!"

"I notice you still have both your eyes," Xiao Wang replied dryly.

Professor laughed aloud. "Yes, I do! But it's a serious matter, so let me explain. What Jesus is saying here is that sin, even 'just' sin in our minds, is so serious that it will send us to hell. Forgiveness is available, but sin is such a terrible thing that we have to be willing to do anything we need to root it out of our lives. We have to be willing to remove anything from our lives that leads us into temptation and sin—even if it's something as precious as an eye or a hand.

"But you see, the problem isn't really with our bodies. If you look at something you shouldn't—say, an immodestly dressed woman, or pornography on the internet—the source of your temptation isn't your eyes! Your eyes don't independently choose what they look at; your mind, your heart directs them. If you tear your eyes out, your heart can still be filled with lust. Or take the example of a petty thief: it isn't his hand that causes him to steal. His hands don't independently decide to reach into someone else's pocket! In fact, even if both his hands are cut off, he'll still take whatever he can carry off with his teeth!

"If it really were your eyes or your hands that made you sin, then you would have to cut them off. But neither they nor any other part of your body are the source of your temptations. Your body may have drives and urges, but in the end it does what your will directs it to."

"Then what's Jesus's point?" Xiao Wang sounded frustrated. He didn't like where the conversation was going. For the first time in a couple of months he almost wished Christianity wasn't true.

Professor Ho finally explained. "What Jesus means is we must be willing to remove from our lives anything under our own control that tends to lead us into sinning. If certain books or movies tempt us to lustful or greedy thoughts, then we need to stop reading and watching them. If certain friends tend to drag us into drunkenness or debauchery, then we need to cut off those relationships. If keeping a certain job means participating in dishonesty, the Christian will need to quit. The price might be quite high—losing friends, losing our employment—but it's worth it to avoid sinning."

"But you just said we only sin when we choose to," said Xiao Wang.

"Yes."

"So why do we need to run away from things that tempt us? We could just choose not to sin."

Professor Ho promptly replied, "Removing ourselves from the path of temptation when possible is part of how we choose not to sin—like turning your head away from a sexy advertisement when you're sitting on the bus. As Martin Luther put it, we can't keep the birds from flying over our heads, but we can prevent them from building nests in our hair!

"To give an example, most of the earnest Christians I know have gotten rid of their television sets and don't watch

popular movies. Television and movies in and of themselves are not sins, and not everything in them is bad. But most of the programming glorifies and arouses lust, greed, jealousy, pride, revenge, and violence. If you don't believe me, think about the characters and plotlines in the average movie or soap opera series, or the sexy advertisements between segments. What does watching those things make you think about? But those thoughts are sin! Because it's nearly impossible to watch popular media and still avoid filling one's mind with what God hates, I got rid of my T.V. years ago. I 'cut it off'—though it was more like the loss of an ingrown toenail than a hand or foot!

Do not take personal vengeance

“Jesus continues by analyzing another provision from the civil law of the Old Testament, the standard for punishment in cases involving personal injury.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' 39 "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. 41 "Whoever forces you to go one mile [i.e. carrying his pack for him], go with him two. 42 "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. [Matthew 5:38-42 NAS; quoting Leviticus 24:20]

The rule 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' might seem harsh to us, but actually is was to prevent the excessive retaliation so common among humans: 'You knocked out my tooth, so I'll kill you!' The Old Testament law quoted limits legal retribution to the equivalent of the harm done, no more."

“What's wrong with that?” Xiao Wang asked. “If we never 'resist an evil person,' society will be in a mess, with the criminals running everything!”

“I quite agree,” affirmed Professor Ho. “Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit affirms that governmental punishment of criminal behavior is ordained by God.” Professor Ho turned further ahead in the New Testament and read:

1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. ... 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. [Romans 13:1, 4-5 NAS]

“Clearly this passage in Romans 13 indicates it is right for the government to punish criminals. At the same time, all of the Bible was written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so the no part of the Bible ever contradicts another part. So what did Jesus mean by 'turn the other cheek'? This question has troubled many sensitive Christians through the centuries.

“I think part of the answer is in the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. We looked at it a moment ago; it tells us who Jesus was talking to.” Professor Ho turned back to Matthew chapter 5.

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and *began* to teach them... [Matthew 5:1-2 NAS]

This teaching was addressed to His disciples. It is the ethical standard to be followed by the citizens of the kingdom of heaven during their sojourn on earth. It was never intended to be a legal code for national government. So, as best I understand it, the summary of Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5:38-42 is: don't take personal vengeance. God has forgiven your sins; you be kind to those who have personally offended against you. You see, people ordinarily want to apply the 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' principle to their personal lives in taking revenge and retribution on those who offend them. Jesus tells us not to, because that's not how God treats us."

“Even letting them beat you up?” Xiao Wang was incredulous. “It says, 'whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.'”

Professor Ho replied, “Most Bible commentators agree that what is in view here is a slap as an insult, not a violent attack on your person. Jesus is saying: don't retaliate against those who insult you. If thieves attack you on the road and start beating you up, self-defense under those circumstances is not the same thing as retribution. And Jesus Himself protested against the illegality when he was slapped or struck during His trial [John 18:22]. But He did not respond with violence.”

“What about carrying somebody's stuff for two miles?” Xiao Wang continued.

“The commentators inform us that a Roman soldier stationed in the provinces had the right to force a local to carry his pack for one mile, from one milestone to the next. So that much was obligatory. Jesus was telling his followers to go beyond what was required as a means of giving a witness to even the occupation troops.”

“What about the beggars in the next verse,” Xiao Li asked. “This has always bothered me. Should I give as much money to anyone as they ask me for?”

“That used to bother me, too,” Professor Ho replied. “As always, we must use scripture to interpret scripture. Jesus said we should love our neighbor as ourselves. That implies that we should do good to them. So let me ask a question. What is your goal when you give money to someone who asks you?”

“Well, to help them of course,” said Xiao Li.

“In that case, you should give as much money as you can *to the extent that it would help them*. If you know they will spend the money on drugs or gambling or prostitution, would it help them for you to give it to them?”

“No.”

“How about if it supported them in continuing a lifestyle of being too lazy to work?”

Xiao Li thought for a moment, then said “I guess that wouldn’t be good for them either.”

“Under those circumstances then, it would not be loving to give it to them,” Professor Ho concluded. “But Jesus is commanding Christians to give sacrificially to help meet others’ genuine needs.

“In all these things, Jesus is telling us: don’t take revenge; don’t insist on your rights; instead, do your best to show forgiveness and unconditional love to everyone, the way God has forgiven you. That’s part of our witness to them to help them believe in the gospel.

“Jesus’s next statement makes this principle even more explicit.”

Love your enemies

Professor Ho turned back to Matthew 5 and continued reading:

43 " You have heard that it was said, ' YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' 44 "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous. 46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing *than others*? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? [Matthew 5:43-47 NAS; quoting Leviticus 19:18]

The first thing to note here is that the phrase ‘love your neighbor’ is in the Old Testament, but ‘hate your enemy’ is not! Presumably that second phrase was a common saying among the people, or at least a common attitude. In fact, the context for Jesus’s Old Testament quote actually forbade hatred, at least for fellow Israelites:

17 'You shall not hate your fellow countryman [lit. brother] in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. 18 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. [Leviticus 19:17-18 NAS]

Not only this, but kindness to enemies was also commanded in the Old Testament, at least with regards to fellow Jews:

4 "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. 5 "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying *helpless* under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release *it* with him. [Exodus 23:4-5 NAS]

Although these rules were ‘on the books’ as it were, it seems that most people were ignoring them. After all, the Old Testament had plenty of examples of God enabling the Jews to defeat enemy nations and even mentions hating the wicked. Everyone would agree that loving your neighbor is fine and good—especially if you can redefine him as your enemy if he does something you don’t like! But here Jesus sweeps right past all our excuse making and selfish vengefulness and confronts us with what might be the most difficult of all his commands: love your enemies, the people who willfully harm you.”

“Can you do that?” Xiao Wang asked Professor Ho.

Professor Ho looked solemn. “I’ve read biographies of Christians who have—in prisons, while being burned at the stake, even under torture. I haven’t been put to the test much, and I’m not sure how I would do. I often find it hard to love people who have offended me in much lesser ways! But I know Jesus was a real human being, and I know He practiced what He preached. He even prayed that God would forgive the people who nailed Him to the cross.

“Jesus tells us to act like this because God Himself is kind to ungrateful and rebellious people. That thought really cuts home, because *I* am one of those ‘unrighteous’ people that God still gives good things to. And to me He gives not only material blessings like sunshine and rain, but also precious, eternal things, like forgiveness of sins, His presence with me now, and the sure hope of eternal heaven. It is on those grounds that He commands me to love my enemies.

“If think this command is too hard for us, we need to face the fact that God will not lower His standard for us. That’s what Jesus says next.”

The summary: Be perfect

“Jesus’s last word in this section summarizes what went before:

48 "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. [Matthew 5:48 NAS]

Be perfect! How different this is from what we say! After all, we say, people aren’t saints; they can’t be perfect! Yet here Jesus demands that we do what God does all the time: live 100% according to the moral standards which we know and acknowledge. In particular, as Christians, that means being as holy and as loving as God the Father is.”

“That seems unreasonable to me,” Xiao Wang said frankly.

“Yes, of course!” Professor Ho admitted, but then immediately countered, “But is it really? Is it unreasonable for God to ask us to do what we know we should?”

“But *all* the time?” complained Xiao Wang.

Professor Ho raised his eyebrows. “How you feel about a bus driver who stayed on the road 95% of the time, a surgeon who made sure to remove the right organ 90% of the time, a mother who remembered to feed her children six days out of seven? Would that seem reasonable to you? Would you like to be under the care of any one of those?”

“But this is different!”

“Why?” asked Professor Ho.

“No one can do the right thing 100% of the time!” Xiao Wang exclaimed, with the air of someone stating the obvious.

“Why not?”

“Well, we might be tired and forget or overlook something.”

“That would be a mistake, not a sin,” replied Professor Ho. “God is commanding us to be *morally* perfect, that is, to choose to do what is right when we know it and can do it.”

“It’s unreasonable to expect people to do that all the time,” Xiao Wang insisted.

“Why? Is it unreasonable to expect the mother to *choose* to feed her children every day when she remembers it and has food in the kitchen? We’ll excuse her if she accidentally *forgets* one or two meals a year—though in fact most mothers don’t fail that often! But would we excuse her *choosing* not to feed them? We’ll excuse the surgeon if he makes a mistake, but not if he *chooses* to be careless. The bus driver might slide off the road if his tire blows out on a rainy day, but will we excuse him for running off the road if he *chooses* to close his eyes to rest them? Will we excuse him if he does it even once?”

Xiao Wang was silent.

“The fact is,” Professor Ho continued, “when we choose to do what is wrong, we could have chosen to do what is right. That’s what God is demanding from us.

“On the one hand, Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount really is the rule by which Christians must live. On the other hand, it serves to show us that we really are *not* good people, and we need God’s forgiveness for our sins.”

“Well,” admitted Xiao Wang, “I’m far from living up to the standards we just discussed. So what’s going to happen to me?”

“Yes—and to me!” replied Professor Ho. “I’m well aware that I’m much better at explaining God rules than keeping them. The truth is, we none of us have lived up to the morals we’ve always acknowledged in our own hearts, much less the full set of rules which Jesus outlines here in the Sermon on the Mount. As the Bible says, we are all sinners. What will happen to us? Basically, we sinners are divided into two different groups: those who have been forgiven, and those who haven’t. That difference will determine our eternal destiny.”

The rich man and Lazarus: The state of our souls after death.

Professor Ho turned onward in the New Testament to the gospel of Luke. “Jesus told a story to illustrate what happens to us after we die. It’s recorded in Luke 16:

19 "Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. 20 "And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, 21 and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. 22 "Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. 23 "In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' 25 "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us.' 27 "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house -- 28 for I have five brothers -- in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' 29 "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' 30 "But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' 31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'" [Luke 16:19-31 NAS]

“Are we supposed to understand this literally?” Xiao Wang asked with skepticism in his voice.

Professor Ho pursed his lips and then replied, “I think it’s obvious that this story is a parable. The dead don’t really holler to each other across a deep ravine; as far as I can tell from the Bible, they wouldn’t even have bodies yet at this point, since it’s before the resurrection. But saying it’s a parable doesn’t mean it isn’t teaching real facts about the next life.

“People often say to me, in a mocking tone, ‘Who can know what happens after we die? How do you know there’s a heaven and a hell?’ I answer them: ‘The same way I know there’s a country called India. I’ve never seen India, but people who’ve been there have told me about it, and even taken pictures for me to see.’ Jesus is God. There’s nothing hidden from Him; He had seen heaven and hell even before He became a human being. He’s the One who knows what happens after we die. And in this parable, He’s showing us a picture of what it looks like.

“First of all, note how the rich man got there. His problem wasn’t that he was wealthy, but that he was selfish and greedy, and did not have compassion on others. Abraham tells the rich man to ‘remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things.’ Thus he is forced to remember how selfish he had been, how heartless toward Lazarus. He is also forced to recognize that he was consistently ungrateful to God for all the good he enjoyed. Finally, the rich man thinks of his relatives, and cannot but realize that the way he lived and talked, his

whole influence on them, was bad, and tended to drag them down into the same Hell he was then suffering. In short, the rich man is finally forced to feel his own moral guilt.

“Secondly, notice what his punishment is like. He is awake and conscious. He can remember his life on earth and the people he left behind there. He is in pain. It may be that the flames are symbolic; in fact, I think they probably are. The real torment may be mental, spiritual, the torment of unremitting accusation from one’s own conscience. Day and night the rich man is thinking about his sins. ‘I ignored Lazarus’s needs while I gluttoned myself feasting. He was hungry and in pain and I didn’t lift a finger to help him. I led my family astray by my bad example. I hardened my heart against the warnings in the Bible.’ This punishment will continue forever, and he knows it. Abraham tells him ‘none may cross over from hell to paradise.’

“Thirdly, notice his attitude toward his family still on earth. The rich man was selfish, but he had some kind of feeling for his brothers. He hopes they won’t go to hell too. I heard so many people say flippant things like ‘if all my family and friends are in hell, I’d want to be there too!’ But hell is not like that. There’s no fellowship or enjoyment of others’ company. It’s a place where all good is lost forever.” Professor Ho looked soberly at Xiao Wang and Xiao Li. “Boys, if you have any relatives in hell, they don’t want you to go there too! Jesus is teaching us that through the rich man’s words.

“Finally, note that the rich man had ample evidence to believe. He had ignored the witness of nature and the evidence for the truth of the Bible that was available to him. He had had access to the Old Testament, but scorned it. He had known about the prophecies which had been fulfilled by his day, but he ignored them. He knows his brothers are just like him, so he asks that extra miraculous evidence be given to them. But Abraham points out that they have enough evidence already; if they won’t accept that, nothing will convince them. Abraham’s words are especially poignant since Jesus was at that very time doing supernatural miracles, even raising the dead—but most of the Jews would still refused to believe in Him.”

Professor Ho paused for a moment and looked solemnly at Xiao Wang. Then he spoke slowly. “To be honest, Xiao Wang, you’re in danger of winding up just like the rich man. You have all the evidence in front of you. If you reject it now, when you get to hell you won’t have any more excuses than the rich man did.”

All three were silent for awhile. Finally Xiao Wang said softly, “I know I’m not really a good person.”

Professor Ho drew the corners of his lips down sympathetically. Then he said gently, “Come back next week, Xiao Wang, and we’ll see what Jesus did about that.”

¹ Josephus. Antiquities of the Jews, Book 18, Chapter 5, Section 2 (= Book 18:116-119).