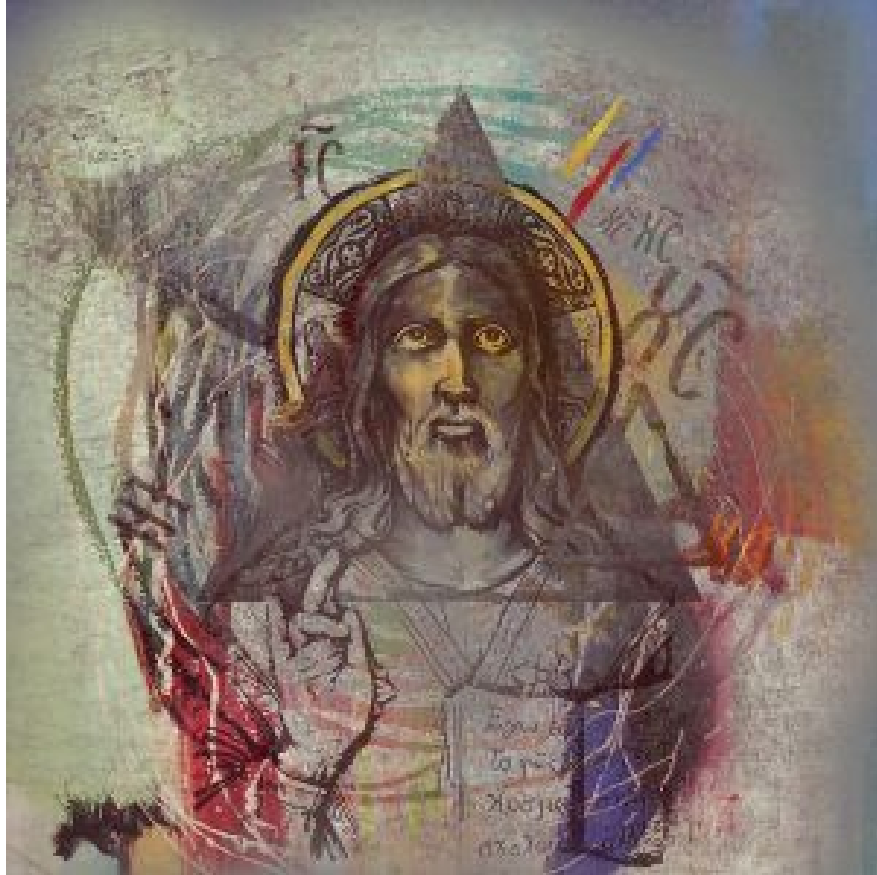


**ODB SERIES: “The Sayings of Jesus”**



**Rev. Dr. David Fekete**

***July/August 2019***

## LESSONS VI-XIII

### LESSON VI

#### Messengers from John the Baptist

<sup>2</sup>When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup>and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup>And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”<sup>1</sup>

#### Jesus Praises John the Baptist

<sup>7</sup>As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

<sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup>From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. <sup>13</sup>For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; <sup>14</sup>and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. <sup>15</sup>Let anyone with ears listen!

<sup>16</sup>“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

<sup>17</sup>‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; <sup>19</sup>the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

#### Woes to Unrepentant Cities

<sup>20</sup>Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. <sup>21</sup>“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup>But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. <sup>23</sup>And you, Capernaum,

---

<sup>1</sup> *The English Standard Version Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009

will you be exalted to heaven?

No, you will be brought down to Hades.

For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. <sup>24</sup> But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”

## Jesus Thanks His Father

<sup>25</sup> At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; <sup>26</sup> yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup> All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

### COMMENTARY

When John the Baptist inquires about who Jesus is, Jesus does not give him a direct answer. Instead, Jesus points to His works,

<sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

This is a reference to Isaiah 34 and 35, about the coming Day of the Lord. Jesus is suggesting that it is at hand, as He did in Matthew 10:7.

### Isaiah 34:

Come near, you nations, and listen;  
pay attention, you peoples!  
Let the earth hear, and all that is in it,  
the world, and all that comes out of it!

<sup>2</sup> The LORD is angry with all nations;  
his wrath is on all their armies.

He will totally destroy<sup>u</sup> them,  
he will give them over to slaughter.

<sup>3</sup> Their slain will be thrown out,  
their dead bodies will stink;  
the mountains will be soaked with their blood.

<sup>4</sup> All the stars in the sky will be dissolved  
and the heavens rolled up like a scroll;  
all the starry host will fall  
like withered leaves from the vine,  
like shriveled figs from the fig tree.

## Isaiah 35:

The desert and the parched land will be glad;  
 the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.  
 Like the crocus,<sup>2</sup> it will burst into bloom;  
 it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.  
 The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,  
 the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;  
 they will see the glory of the LORD,  
 the splendor of our God.

<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the feeble hands,  
 steady the knees that give way;  
<sup>4</sup> say to those with fearful hearts,  
 “Be strong, do not fear;  
 your God will come,  
 he will come with vengeance;  
 with divine retribution  
 he will come to save you.”

<sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

<sup>6</sup> Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
 and the mute tongue shout for joy.  
 Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
 and streams in the desert.

<sup>7</sup> The burning sand will become a pool,  
 the thirsty ground bubbling springs.  
 In the haunts where jackals once lay,  
 grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

<sup>8</sup> And a highway will be there;  
 it will be called the Way of Holiness;  
 it will be for those who walk on that Way.  
 The unclean will not journey on it;  
 wicked fools will not go about on it.

<sup>9</sup> No lion will be there,  
 nor any ravenous beast;  
 they will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there,  
<sup>10</sup> and those the LORD has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;  
 everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
 Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
 and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Swedenborg’s symbolism points to spiritual purification in these miracles. The blind receiving sight symbolizes enlightenment, or receiving truth. Leprosy symbolizes profaning truth. This is when a

person knows what is true, yet lives contrary to the truth. Jesus healing leprosy symbolizes reforming the life by means of truth through God's power. The same is symbolized by raising the dead. We are spiritually dead when we live a life of self-interest and shut out God. Being raised from the dead means being given spiritual life, faith and Charity. The poor are those without truth, so the Good News (Gospel) is brought to them through Jesus' teachings.

This claim that the Day of the Lord is at hand is reinforced with Jesus' sayings about John the Baptist himself. Jesus says that John the Baptist is the Elijah who is to come before the great and dreadful Day of the Lord,

### **Malachi 3:1-3:**

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.

### **Malachi 4:1-6:**

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. <sup>2</sup> But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. <sup>3</sup> Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty.

<sup>4</sup> "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

<sup>5</sup> "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

Jesus then says that both His message and that of John the Baptist are rejected. John the Baptist observes fasting and doesn't touch strong drink, as is appropriate for special prophets, and the authorities say he has a demon. Jesus communes with sinners and tax collectors, and drinks and eats—i.e., doesn't observe the Jewish rituals. The authorities denounce Him as, "A glutton, and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." This accusation is in keeping with what Jesus Himself says just above, "And blessed is anyone who ***takes no offense*** at me" (Matthew 11:6). The words I have in italics and boldface are covered with one Greek word, *skandalidzomai*. Notice the Greek root of the English word, *scandalize*. Jesus is saying blessed are those who are not scandalized by Him.

As if he were asking to be a scandal, Jesus has harsh words for Israel. In the light of His message to John the Baptist, Jesus again refers to the miracles He is performing in Israel. Yet His very people do not acknowledge His divinity, nor accept His message. Jesus points to outsiders in Syria—Tyre and Sidon—outsiders in geography (they are not in the Holy Land), and in religion (they are worshippers of Baal and Astarte—the wicked Queen Jezebel was from Tyre) as people who readily accept His words. He even goes so far as to say that Sodom itself will be better off than Israel in the Day of Judgement. Remarks like this must have inflamed the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

Matthew 11 concludes with one of the gentlest sayings in the New Testament. Following Jesus brings rest for one's soul, for His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

## LESSON VII

### Matthew 12:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. <sup>2</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

<sup>3</sup> He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? <sup>4</sup> He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. <sup>5</sup> Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? <sup>6</sup> I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. <sup>7</sup> If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. <sup>8</sup> For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

<sup>9</sup> Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, <sup>10</sup> and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

<sup>11</sup> He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? <sup>12</sup> How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

<sup>13</sup> Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. <sup>14</sup> But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

### Jesus and Beelzebul

<sup>22</sup> Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. <sup>23</sup> All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

<sup>24</sup> But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

<sup>25</sup> Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. <sup>26</sup> If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup> And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. <sup>28</sup> But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

<sup>29</sup> "Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

<sup>30</sup> “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. <sup>31</sup> And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

<sup>33</sup> “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. <sup>35</sup> A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. <sup>36</sup> But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. <sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

## The Sign of Jonah

<sup>38</sup> Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”

<sup>39</sup> He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. <sup>42</sup> The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

<sup>43</sup> “When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. <sup>44</sup> Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. <sup>45</sup> Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.”

## Jesus’ Mother and Brothers

<sup>46</sup> While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. <sup>47</sup> Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”

<sup>48</sup> He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”<sup>49</sup> Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

### COMMENTARY

The first story is about the intersection between religious precepts and human living. Jesus and His disciples are hungry, so they pick grain on the Sabbath. This is considered work, which is

prohibited on the Sabbath, according to the Pharisees. Jesus counters with a reference to 1 Samuel 21, in which David eats sacred bread from the temple, which only priests are supposed to have access to.

**1 Samuel 21:**<sup>2</sup> David answered Ahimelek the priest, “The king sent me on a mission and said to me, ‘No one is to know anything about the mission I am sending you on.’ As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place.<sup>3</sup> Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find.”

<sup>4</sup> But the priest answered David, “I don’t have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women.”

<sup>5</sup> David replied, “Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever<sup>[b]</sup> I set out. The men’s bodies are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!”<sup>6</sup> So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away.

Jesus then brings up the fact that priests work in the temple on the Sabbath, violating Sabbath rules, yet this is permitted. Finally, Jesus refers to Micah 6:8:

<sup>8</sup> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly<sup>[c]</sup> with your God.

Jesus is pointing to life, not rules as the basis of religion. Mercy, acting justly, and humility are what God wants—not adherence to overwrought rules and regulations. Perhaps this is why Jesus says that the Son of Man—not Son of God—is Lord of the Sabbath. That is, the operative rules of religion are for the benefit of Man—humanity—not for the benefit of religious institutions and man-made regulations. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Then Jesus tests the limits of this new understanding of religious rules. Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Again, this is considered work, so the Pharisees denounce Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Life and human wellbeing are what religion is about, not following rules. Jesus points out that one would save a sheep which has fallen into a pit on the Sabbath, and humans are more valuable than sheep. The result of Jesus’ actions, Matthew tells us, is that the Pharisees now begin to plot how to kill Jesus.

The common people believe Jesus to be the Messiah, but the religious authorities say that Jesus is demonic. Using reason, Jesus points out that if Satan drives out demons, then Satan is divided against himself.

Jesus makes a strong statement, that whoever is not with Him is against Him. This is a difficult saying. It would imply, by one literal reading, that all non-Christians are against Jesus. I would read it a little more expansively. What does it mean to be “with Jesus?” I say it means to be with the things Jesus teaches, to be with the life that Jesus lives. Living a life of love for God and love for the neighbor is being “with Jesus.” So anyone who is living a loving life is with Jesus.

The unforgivable sin is sin against the Holy Spirit. This, too, is a difficult passage. The issue is being filled with the Spirit. The Spirit is something that affects a person internally. You can’t blaspheme against the Spirit if you aren’t in relation with the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit, and then acting against it is unforgivable. This represents not simple evil, but turning against truth after accepting it. This makes evil and truth to be connected—a kind of heaven and hell conjunction. This is what Jesus means in Revelation 3:15-16:



<sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

This connected disparity is a grievous condition. This does not mean the struggle between good and evil that spiritual people go through. That struggle may look like evil and truth are joined. But the struggle indicates that the Spirit is striving to enter our heart deeper and deeper. Blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is blaspheme against the Spirit in us after we have accepted it.

Jesus speaks about good trees bringing forth good fruit. This refers to good deeds from a loving heart.

Jesus again use inflammatory language, referring to Jonah. Jonah was sent to save the people of Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria. It was the Assyrians who ravaged the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 740 BCE. Jonah hated the Assyrians for this, and saving them was the furthest thing from his mind. God forced him to preach to them, and the people of Nineveh repented. Jesus contrasts the hated Assyrians who repented with present-day Jews who refuse to accept Jesus' message. He says that it will be better for the Ninevites than for Jews in the next life.

When the spirit leaves the house, he returns with 7 more. This means that after we may have mastered some evil, we are not to return to it. If we return to an evil we have mastered once, it comes back 7 times as strong. I know that if I go back to drinking, it will likely be as bad, probably worse than before. And I may not make it back out.

Finally, Jesus separates Himself from His maternal family. In the Gospels, Jesus never calls Mary, "mother." Here, Jesus separates Himself from His brothers and sisters and mother. Yet in doing so, Jesus welcomes us all into His spiritual family. We are Jesus' brother, sister, and mother, if we follow His teachings. "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

## LESSON VII

### Matthew 12:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. <sup>2</sup>When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

<sup>3</sup>He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? <sup>4</sup>He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. <sup>5</sup>Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? <sup>6</sup>I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. <sup>7</sup>If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. <sup>8</sup>For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

<sup>9</sup>Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, <sup>10</sup>and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

<sup>11</sup> He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? <sup>12</sup> How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

<sup>13</sup> Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. <sup>14</sup> But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

## Jesus and Beelzebul

<sup>22</sup> Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. <sup>23</sup> All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

<sup>24</sup> But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”

<sup>25</sup> Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. <sup>26</sup> If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup> And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. <sup>28</sup> But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

<sup>29</sup> “Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

<sup>30</sup> “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. <sup>31</sup> And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

<sup>33</sup> “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. <sup>35</sup> A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. <sup>36</sup> But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. <sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

## The Sign of Jonah

<sup>38</sup> Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”

<sup>39</sup> He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. <sup>42</sup> The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

<sup>43</sup> “When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. <sup>44</sup> Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’ When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean

and put in order. <sup>45</sup> Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.”

## Jesus’ Mother and Brothers

<sup>46</sup> While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. <sup>47</sup> Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”

<sup>48</sup> He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”<sup>49</sup> Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

### COMMENTARY

The first story is about the intersection between religious precepts and human living. Jesus and His disciples are hungry, so they pick grain on the Sabbath. This is considered work, which is prohibited on the Sabbath, according to the Pharisees. Jesus counters with a reference to 1 Samuel 21, in which David eats sacred bread from the temple, which only priests are supposed to have access to.

**1 Samuel 21:** <sup>2</sup> David answered Ahimelek the priest, “The king sent me on a mission and said to me, ‘No one is to know anything about the mission I am sending you on.’ As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. <sup>3</sup> Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find.”

<sup>4</sup> But the priest answered David, “I don’t have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women.”

<sup>5</sup> David replied, “Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever <sup>[b]</sup> I set out. The men’s bodies are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!” <sup>6</sup> So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away.

Jesus then brings up the fact that priests work in the temple on the Sabbath, violating Sabbath rules, yet this is permitted. Finally, Jesus refers to Micah 6:8:

<sup>8</sup> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly<sup>[a]</sup> with your God.

Jesus is pointing to life, not rules as the basis of religion. Mercy, acting justly, and humility are what God wants—not adherence to overwrought rules and regulations. Perhaps this is why Jesus says that the Son of Man—not Son of God—is Lord of the Sabbath. That is, the operative rules of religion are for the benefit of Man—humanity—not for the benefit of religious institutions and man-made regulations. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Then Jesus tests the limits of this new understanding of religious rules. Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Again, this is considered work, so the Pharisees denounce Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Life and human wellbeing are what religion is about, not following rules. Jesus points out that one would save a sheep which has fallen into a pit on the Sabbath, and humans are more valuable than sheep. The result of Jesus' actions, Matthew tells us, is that the Pharisees now begin to plot how to kill Jesus.

The common people believe Jesus to be the Messiah, but the religious authorities say that Jesus is demonic. Using reason, Jesus points out that if Satan drives out demons, then Satan is divided against himself.

Jesus makes a strong statement, that whoever is not with Him is against Him. This is a difficult saying. It would imply, by one literal reading, that all non-Christians are against Jesus. I would read it a little more expansively. What does it mean to be "with Jesus?" I say it means to be with the things Jesus teaches, to be with the life that Jesus lives. Living a life of love for God and love for the neighbor is being "with Jesus." So anyone who is living a loving life is with Jesus.

The unforgivable sin is sin against the Holy Spirit. This, too, is a difficult passage. The issue is being filled with the Spirit. The Spirit is something that affects a person internally. You can't blaspheme against the Spirit if you aren't in relation with the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit, and then acting against it is unforgivable. This represents not simple evil, but turning against truth after accepting it. This makes evil and truth to be connected—a kind of heaven and hell conjunction. This is what Jesus means in Revelation 3:15-16:

<sup>15</sup>I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

This connected disparity is a grievous condition. This does not mean the struggle between good and evil that spiritual people go through. That struggle may look like evil and truth are joined. But the struggle indicates that the Spirit is striving to enter our heart deeper and deeper. Blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is blaspheme against the Spirit in us after we have accepted it.

Jesus speaks about good trees bringing forth good fruit. This refers to good deeds from a loving heart.

Jesus again use inflammatory language, referring to Jonah. Jonah was sent to save the people of Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria. It was the Assyrians who ravaged the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 740 BCE. Jonah hated the Assyrians for this, and saving them was the furthest thing from his mind. God forced him to preach to them, and the people of Nineveh repented. Jesus contrasts the hated Assyrians who repented with present-day Jews who refuse to accept Jesus' message. He says that it will be better for the Ninevites than for Jews in the next life.

When the spirit leaves the house, he returns with 7 more. This means that after we may have mastered some evil, we are not to return to it. If we return to an evil we have mastered once, it comes back 7 times as strong. I know that if I go back to drinking, it will likely be as bad, probably worse than before. And I may not make it back out.

Finally, Jesus separates Himself from His maternal family. In the Gospels, Jesus never calls Mary, "mother." Here, Jesus separates Himself from His brothers and sisters and mother. Yet in doing so, Jesus welcomes us all into His spiritual family. We are Jesus' brother, sister, and mother, if we follow His teachings. "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

## Lesson VIII

### Matthew 13

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.<sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.<sup>3</sup> Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed.<sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.<sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.<sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.<sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.<sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.<sup>9</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

<sup>10</sup> The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

<sup>11</sup> He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.<sup>12</sup> Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.<sup>13</sup> This is why I speak to them in parables:

“Though seeing, they do not see;  
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

<sup>14</sup> In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“You will be ever hearing but never understanding;  
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

<sup>15</sup> For this people’s heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.’

<sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.<sup>17</sup> For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

<sup>18</sup> “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:<sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.<sup>20</sup> The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at

once receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup> But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. <sup>22</sup> The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

## The Parable of the Weeds

<sup>24</sup> Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup> But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup> When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

<sup>27</sup> “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

<sup>28</sup> “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

<sup>29</sup> “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup> Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

## The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

<sup>31</sup> He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. <sup>32</sup> Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

<sup>33</sup> He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds<sup>[b]</sup> of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

<sup>34</sup> Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. <sup>35</sup> So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables,  
I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

## The Parable of the Weeds Explained

<sup>36</sup> Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

<sup>37</sup> He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

<sup>40</sup> “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. <sup>42</sup> They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

## The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

<sup>44</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

<sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup> When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

## The Parable of the Net

<sup>47</sup> “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. <sup>48</sup> When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. <sup>49</sup> This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>51</sup> “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied.

<sup>52</sup> He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

### A Prophet Without Honor

<sup>53</sup> When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. <sup>54</sup> Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. <sup>55</sup> “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? <sup>56</sup> Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” <sup>57</sup> And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home.”

<sup>58</sup> And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

## COMMENTARY

“Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Matthew 13:34).

Swedenborg says that there are two reasons why Jesus spoke in parables. First, the poetic language of parables can hold more meaning than philosophical language, or other linear, discursive language. The language of parables, or correspondences in Swedenborg’s terminology, can be unpacked on nearly infinite levels—even in angelic language. Secondly, the language of parables protects the deeper truths from people who are not ready to hear the truths yet. If a person who is not ready to hear truth does hear it, he or she will not accept it, may reject it, may even oppose it. So Jesus says,

“Though seeing, they do not see;  
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

But in the language of parable, as a person matures spiritually, then he or she finds more and more meaning in a parable—“when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

Jesus explains the meaning of the parable of the sower. But there are two issues that I would like to comment on further. Worries and cares of this world dull the messages of Jesus. Sometimes the world teaches us things that are contrary to Jesus’ message. We are told to be the best, the greatest, most famous, possess the most and most prestigious material goods, be the boss—not the worker. While Jesus teaches us to be humble, not to worry about material goods, to serve, not be served. We have difficulty accepting our lot in life, sometimes. But accepting what we have and treasuring the good things we have is a heavenly way to approach life. God will take care of us, and nothing bad can happen to us that God won’t turn to good, or give us the strength to bear. We need to trust that things will be alright. When we are in this frame of mind, we may feel heavenly joy faintly, and in the next life deeply.

Then there is the saying that the seed produces a crop—hundred, sixty, thirty. Spirituality is not static. That is, it grows in us. This is the meaning of Jesus’ words, “Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” Those who have the beginnings of spirituality will grow in their understanding of truth and their love will be refined and purified. They will know more and more how to serve and do good, and will do so. Those who have no spirituality will reject what little they have. This is the meaning of the mustard seed and the yeast. Spirituality starts little and grows until it becomes foremost in a person’s life. This is the pearl of great price and the treasure in the field. It is worth everything to find a spiritual mode of living. Though it needs to be said that spirituality does not require us to abandon useful life in the world, a job and family.

The parable of the weeds brings up an interesting Swedenborgian doctrine. We live our lives in between heaven and hell. We have both in us. If our evils were taken away instantly, we would have no life. And as spirituality is being instilled in us, like yeast in dough, we continue to indulge our cravings and distortions of love. But as the yeast penetrates further in us, we are purified of our evils, they are pushed to the periphery of our consciousness, and good feelings, love, and truth become more what we are made of. This can’t happen instantly. We live in our comfort zone as spirituality is finding root in us. Though our comfort zone may be twisted, though our behaviors may be maladaptive, it is all we know. As the yeast spreads through us, the spiral of maladaptive behaviors unwinds and we learn new, healthy, spiritual ways of relating to the world and to God.

Jesus says that the separation of good from bad will happen in the last days. Swedenborgians are the only Christians who do not believe in the last days. We face the judgement at the end of our lives, when we are allowed to follow our hearts.

Jesus is the son of a tradesman, and had no rabbinical education. The great New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan even goes so far as to say that Jesus couldn’t read. Jesus’ humble origins are one reason why the religious authorities denounce Jesus. They also denounce his followers as unsophisticated, illiterate, and gullible. Jesus is unable to teach and heal in His home town because people refuse to recognize that this humble local could have wisdom and authority. Personally, I found that I needed to move away from home before I could flourish in my own way—away from family preconceptions of who I am or can be. I even left the church and came back later with greater understanding of religion and having grown and developed spiritually in my absence. Also, I continue to enrich my religious understanding through interfaith work and the wisdom of other religions.



## WEEK IX

**Matthew 15** Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup>“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” <sup>3</sup>He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup>For God said,<sup>[a]</sup> ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ <sup>5</sup>But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’<sup>[b]</sup> then that person need not honor the father.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>6</sup>So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word<sup>[d]</sup> of God. <sup>7</sup>You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

<sup>8</sup>“This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
<sup>9</sup>in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

### Things That Defile

<sup>10</sup>Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: <sup>11</sup>it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” <sup>12</sup>Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” <sup>13</sup>He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. <sup>14</sup>Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.<sup>[e]</sup> And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” <sup>15</sup>But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” <sup>16</sup>Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? <sup>17</sup>Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? <sup>18</sup>But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. <sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup>These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

### The Canaanite Woman’s Faith

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” <sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” <sup>24</sup>He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” <sup>26</sup>He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup>She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

**16** The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.<sup>2</sup> He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’<sup>3</sup> And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>4</sup> An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” Then he left them and went away.

## The Yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees

<sup>5</sup> When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. <sup>6</sup> Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” <sup>7</sup> They said to one another, “It is because we have brought no bread.” <sup>8</sup> And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? <sup>9</sup> Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>10</sup> Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>11</sup> How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” <sup>12</sup> Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

### COMMENTARY

Matthew 15 begins with a contrast between tradition and God’s commands. Jesus’s disciples do not wash their hands according to the Jewish rituals of Jesus’ day. This is another example of Jesus breaking the many detailed rituals that covered nearly every aspect of human life. The Pharisees ask Jesus why His disciples don’t follow the *traditions of the elders*. Jesus replies by asking the Pharisees why they break the *commands of God*. Jesus points out that the Jews teach that money that could be given to support their parents are given to support the temple. Jesus quotes the ten commandments, “Honor your father and mother.” He says that the money which the Pharisees say should go to the temple are being withheld from their parents, and that they are in violation of the ten commandments. So Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of violating God’s commands. This is His response to the question about why Jesus’ disciples break traditions of the elders.

Ceremonially washing is a purification ritual. If a person fails to wash, then he or she is ritually unclean. But Jesus says that the purity rituals regarding eating and ceremonially washing do not render a person clean spiritually. This is another example of Jesus pointing inward to what is in a person’s heart. What is inside our souls matters, not what we do externally to our bodies. With neat symmetry, Jesus says that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of the mouth. Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.

Matthew’s Gospel favors Israel, and the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is an example. A Canaanite woman in Lebanon (Tyre and Sidon) begs for her daughter to be healed by Jesus. But Jesus appears to claim that He is sent to the Israelites, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The Israelites are the children and the Canaanite woman is the dogs. The woman accepts Jesus’ metaphor and turns it in her favor, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” The woman is certain that Jesus has the power to heal her daughter. And due to her confidence, Jesus heals her daughter.

We saw in earlier lessons that when Jesus was in regions where people didn't believe in Him He was unable to heal. We can spiritualize this idea to our own regeneration. In order for God's healing love to enter our hearts, we need to believe in God and ask God into our hearts. Stubborn disbelief renders us unable to receive God's influx, for God literally flows into us when we believe. Hence we can't be "healed" when we disbelieve—we can't be regenerated when we disbelieve. But believing in God allows us to form a reciprocal love relation with God. God always loves everyone. But for us to enter heaven we need to love God back and enter into a relationship with God. Loving God means loving what God is and stands for. It means loving what is good, and doing what is good, for God is Good Itself.

The Pharisees want Jesus to give them a sign to prove His divinity. Jesus says that they know how to read the signs of nature, i.e., red sky in the morning means bad weather. Jesus accuses them of being unable to read the present times, or Jesus' mission. We have seen that Jesus uses Old Testament passages to assert that the Great Day of God is at hand. All the miracles Jesus is doing indicate that the Day is at hand. It is as if the Pharisees are saying, "Prove it!" Jesus says that only Jonah's sign will be given. Jonah was charged with bringing the message of impending doom to the residents of Nineveh if they don't repent. John the Baptist's message was to repent because the kingdom is at hand. Jesus is saying that the demand for a sign from the Pharisees indicates their refusal to repent and believe that the Day of God is here.

Jesus implies that the teachings of the Pharisees are as insidious as yeast is which spreads through a whole batch of dough. We see in the story of the yeast of Pharisees that the disciples have a hard time understanding Jesus. Do we see a trace of exasperation in Jesus?

Jesus said, "You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? <sup>9</sup> Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>10</sup> Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>11</sup> How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread?"

Not only is Jesus breaking the traditions and rituals of Judaism of his day, here and in many other places, He sets Himself against the religious powers of His day. For these reasons, the Pharisees sought to silence Jesus, and when that was impossible, to assassinate Him.

## WEEK X

### Matthew 16

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,<sup>[c]</sup> the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter,<sup>[d]</sup> and on this rock<sup>[c]</sup> I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on

earth will be loosed in heaven.”<sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was<sup>[f]</sup> the Messiah.<sup>[g]</sup>

## Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

<sup>21</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” <sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

## The Cross and Self-Denial

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

<sup>27</sup> “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

## Matthew 17

### Jesus Cures a Boy with a Demon

<sup>14</sup> When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him,<sup>15</sup> and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. <sup>16</sup> And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” <sup>17</sup> Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” <sup>18</sup> And Jesus rebuked the demon,<sup>[h]</sup> and it<sup>[i]</sup> came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” <sup>20</sup> He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a<sup>[j]</sup> mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

**18** At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”<sup>2</sup> He called a child, whom he put among them,<sup>3</sup> and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

### Temptations to Sin

<sup>6</sup> “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. <sup>7</sup> Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!

<sup>8</sup> “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup> And if your eye

causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell<sup>[a]</sup> of fire.

## The Parable of the Lost Sheep

<sup>10</sup> “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>12</sup> What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? <sup>13</sup> And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. <sup>14</sup> So it is not the will of your<sup>[a]</sup> Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

### COMMENTARY

The story Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah has some important information in it. Jesus first asks His disciples who other people say that He is. Some say that He is Elijah, who was supposed to appear before the Great Day of Yahweh. Others say He is Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. Jesus then asks them whom they say that He is. It is Peter who makes the right answer. He says that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) the Son of the Living God. Jesus says that Peter is blessed, as God in heaven revealed that to him.

Jesus says that Peter (*Petros*) is the rock (*petra*) on which Jesus will build the church. Jesus says further, that Peter will be given the keys to the kingdom of heaven and what Peter binds on earth will be bound in heaven, and what Peter looses on earth will be loosed in heaven. Catholics take this to mean that Peter is the first pope. They take it further to mean that whoever Catholic priests forgive are forgiven in heaven, and whoever priests condemn are condemned to hell. Protestants don’t accept this doctrine. Forgiveness and damnation are between a person and God. No human being can intervene between a person and God. Furthermore, God doesn’t condemn anyone to hell. A person him or herself alienates themselves from God if they deliberately turn away from God and become hateful, rejecting love. God wants everyone to love God and the neighbor and we are only truly happy when we do. So in Matthew 18:14 Jesus says, “So it is not the will of your<sup>[a]</sup> Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

Then, after Peter tells Jesus that He is the Messiah, Jesus tells the disciples that He will be rejected by the chief priests and elders, be killed, and rise on the third day. Peter then says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Peter’s response shows what the expectations of the Messiah were. We have looked at this before. The Messiah was supposed to rule as a king in Jerusalem, drive out the Romans, and Israel was supposed to be a source of spiritual light to the whole world. If Jesus is killed, none of this can happen. So Peter says, “This must never happen to you.”

Jesus’ response is strong, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” For the material world to be transformed, and for Jesus to be proclaimed king are human things. They relate to worldly affairs. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, Jesus tried to reshape the expectations of what the Messiah was to be and do. Two passages in John relate to the Messianic expectations of the disciples. John 6:15 says, “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” Jesus teaches that His kingdom is spiritual, not earthly. He tells this to Pilate at His trial, My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to

keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here. And at the trial, Jesus explains His mission on earth,

For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

Jesus then says that we must take up our cross and follow him. How could this have meaning before the crucifixion? While Jesus has said that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Now we are told that we need to carry the cross of Jesus. I think that Christianity is difficult at times. Doing the right thing is not always easy in a fallen world. We are tempted by our hereditary evils. Hereditary evils are tendencies to sin which we have inherited from our parents. There is even scientific evidence that trauma can be passed down through genes to children. Furthermore, the world teaches things that are contrary to the Christian message. Teachings that emphasize self, that teach us to be better and superior to others, that teach us to amass wealth are contrary to Jesus' message. So we may struggle in this world to keep our poise spiritually and not be seduced to sin through genetics or worldly messages. We must die to worldly messages that massage ego. And we are to live for ideals like neighborly love, love for God, humility, and love for truth.

We read the teachings about cutting off hands and feet to keep us from sin in the light of these ideas. These are ideas that contrast material benefit with spiritual salvation. We don't need to dismember our bodies to be saved. Rather, we need to balance worldly ideals with spiritual ideals. This is the same Jesus who said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render to God the things that are God's." Not everything that the world asks of us, in fact demands, are not opposed to Heavenly things. We need to make money to survive. This means to work. But our work is a service to others. We love the neighbor by working. We form intimate relationships, which is the most intense experience of love that we know on earth. Things like this are spiritual and Godly. It is when they become extreme that they become problems. When we crave wealth for its own sake, then we fall away from spirituality. This is the hand or foot we need to cut off for the sake of salvation. Or when sensual gratification becomes paramount, we can be led away from fidelity or modesty. This is the hand or foot we need to cut off. It is when natural drives which are healthy and good becomes addictions and cravings that sin is born.

In a metaphoric sense, we need to become children. What is it about children that make them fit metaphors for spirituality? First, it is childlike innocence. Innocence is difficult to define, but we know it when we see it. It is not being gullible. It is not being ignorant. But rather being sincere, without duplicity and guile, being humble, not being a smooth operator, crafty. When we are able to respond spontaneously to others and be genuine, we are childlike. These are some of the qualities that are being like children. These are innocent qualities.

Swedenborg contrasts the innocence of ignorance with the innocence of wisdom. Children are in the innocence of ignorance. They are not self-directed, and they don't know much. We lose this childhood innocence as we grow. But as we mature spiritually, we grow in wisdom and we're able to direct ourselves innocently. As aged people, we become childlike, but wise. We can choose between good and evil and direct ourselves accordingly.

## WEEK XI

### Matthew 18:

#### Dealing With Sin in the Church

<sup>15</sup> “If your brother or sister <sup>[b]</sup> sins, <sup>[c]</sup> go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. <sup>16</sup> But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ <sup>[d]</sup> <sup>17</sup> If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

<sup>18</sup> “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be <sup>[e]</sup> bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be <sup>[f]</sup> loosed in heaven.

<sup>19</sup> “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

#### The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold <sup>[g]</sup> was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

<sup>26</sup> “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ <sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. <sup>[h]</sup> He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

<sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

<sup>30</sup> “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ <sup>34</sup> In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

<sup>35</sup> “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

## Matthew 19:

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. <sup>2</sup> Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

<sup>3</sup> Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

<sup>4</sup> “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup> and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’<sup>[b]</sup>? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

<sup>7</sup> “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

<sup>8</sup> Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. <sup>9</sup> I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

<sup>10</sup> The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

<sup>11</sup> Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

### The Little Children and Jesus

<sup>13</sup> Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

<sup>14</sup> Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” <sup>15</sup> When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

### The Rich and the Kingdom of God

<sup>16</sup> Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?”

<sup>17</sup> “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”



<sup>18</sup> “Which ones?” he inquired.

Jesus replied, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, <sup>19</sup> honor your father and mother,<sup>’[d]</sup> and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>’[d]</sup>”

<sup>20</sup> “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

<sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

<sup>23</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

<sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?”

<sup>26</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

<sup>27</sup> Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”

<sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife<sup>[d]</sup> or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

## COMMENTARY

Our passage from Matthew 18 begins with a very practical and worthwhile recommendation. It deals with times when people have offended us. First, we are told that we are to confront the offending individual. We can’t let it simmer in us and grow into a poison tree, as Blake’s poem of that name illustrates. Then there are step by step guidelines. First, we confront the individual one-on-one, so as not to make their offence public and a matter of gossip. Then we bring in two or three others, if they do not heed us.

In Jewish law, one needed two or three other witnesses if a person brings an accusation against another. That is why the Jewish courts weren’t able to convict Jesus, and they had to turn to Rome. They could not find two or three witnesses whose stories agreed against Jesus.

Finally, one makes a public accusation in front of the church. These were no doubt policy recommendations designed to protect the church and preserve harmony.

In this context, Jesus’ words that what is bound or loosed on earth is bound or loosed in heaven are now applied to all the disciples. Spirituality is not a matter of pleasing the mob. Where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, He is with them. This statement can be read in the light of humility. It is not grandeur that makes for spirituality, it is spirit. Jesus’ birth in a barn is contrasted with the grandeur of Caesar in Luke’s birth account. Nor did Jesus teach the religious authorities and politically powerful—He taught the peasants, slaves, poor, and common. He wouldn’t speak to Pilate until compelled.

Jesus asks for us to forgive. Seventy times seven times, or always. In the story of the unmerciful servant, the servant’s debt is forgiven. Many Christians take this passage as an example of

God's forgiveness of us. All our sins are cancelled for those who believe, they say. Like a car loan which the bank forgives. In fact I heard a preacher use that example.

Swedenborg does say that God sees only good in people and forgives sin. But that doesn't nullify the results of sin. True, God never punishes. But when a person is consumed with some vice, forgiveness won't make the person whole and good. Forgiving an active alcoholic won't make them sober. Forgiving a murderer won't take away his or her bloodlust. So we need to distinguish between forgiveness and repentance. Only by ceasing to do evil, learning to do good will sin be removed.

Then there is the issue of punishment. God never punishes. God loves and when we are "near" God we feel God's love. But when we are involved in some sinful behavior, we distance ourselves from God. God is good, and when we do bad, we remove ourselves from good, from God. While we are near God, evil can't attack us. God's love is too strong to permit evil to approach. But when we remove ourselves from God's love, and thus from God, evil can get at us. There are people, and spirits who love to hurt other people, hurt us. When we remove ourselves from God's presence, then these evil spirits can punish us, hurt us, which they love to do. This is seen as God's punishment, but it is, in fact, the karma and consequence of our own spiritual condition.

Read strictly, adultery is the only cause justifying divorce. In Swedenborg's book on marriage, *Marital Love*, or, *Conjugal Love*, he allows for other reasons for divorce. And clearly, if a person is in an abusive relationship, separation is justified. Whether one can divorce because love has faded or the couple has drifted apart is a grey area. Why has love faded? Why did the couple drift apart?

There is a correspondence, a living relationship between Jesus' love for the church and His union with it, and the love couples feel. In fact, Jesus' relationship with the church is the very source of the love couples feel. In many places in the New Testament, Jesus compares Himself to a bridegroom.

The passage about eunuchs has been used to justify celibacy. Jesus says, "Some are made eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom." Catholics take this to mean that a person needs to be a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom. For Catholics, that means that priests, monks, and nuns must be celibate. I confess, I do not agree that a statement that reads, "Some are made eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom," is decidedly not, "One must be made a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom."

When the rich man asks Jesus what he needs to do to be saved, Jesus says nothing about faith or belief. He says to follow the Ten Commandments. The rich man seems attached to his wealth, which taints his good deeds. Wealth is not a sin. But attachment to wealth and greed are sins.

## LESSON XII

### Matthew 20

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage,<sup>[a]</sup> he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup> and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. <sup>5</sup> When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> And about five

o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?'<sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'<sup>8</sup> When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'<sup>9</sup> When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.<sup>[b]</sup><sup>10</sup> Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.<sup>[c]</sup><sup>11</sup> And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,<sup>12</sup> saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'<sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?'<sup>[d]</sup><sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.<sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'<sup>[e]</sup><sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first will be last."<sup>[f]</sup>

### **A Third Time Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

<sup>17</sup> While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way,<sup>18</sup> "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death;<sup>19</sup> then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised."

### **The Request of the Mother of James and John**

<sup>20</sup> Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him.<sup>21</sup> And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."<sup>22</sup> But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able."<sup>23</sup> He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

<sup>24</sup> When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers.<sup>25</sup> But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.<sup>26</sup> It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,<sup>27</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave;<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

### **Matthew 21:**

<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus entered the temple<sup>[g]</sup> and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.<sup>13</sup> He said to them, "It is written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer';  
but you are making it a den of robbers."

<sup>14</sup> The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.<sup>15</sup> But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard<sup>[h]</sup> the children crying out in the temple,

“Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry <sup>16</sup> and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies  
you have prepared praise for yourself?’”

<sup>18</sup> In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. <sup>19</sup> And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once. <sup>20</sup> When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” <sup>21</sup> Jesus answered them, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done. <sup>22</sup> Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.”

## The Authority of Jesus Questioned

<sup>23</sup> When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup> Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup> Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

### COMMENTARY

I confess that I sympathize with the workers who worked all day and wanted more money than those who worked only a short time got. I think the root of this story is contentment with a person’s lot in life. We are not in a position to judge the “amount” spiritually due to us. We don’t know what others are going through. We don’t know what is going on in the souls of other people. So we are not in a position to judge their spiritual condition or spiritual gifts. We may complain about our past, about our childhood, about the struggles we go through. We may imagine that others have had it easier. We may envy the life other people have compared with our own. But our only worry is really how our own life is. Do we have a good life? Do we look at our blessings and we are grateful? Or do we look at what we want and complain about the things we don’t have? Do we compare ourselves to others? God knows what we have gone through. God gives us as much happiness as we can bear.

There is a Buddhist story about this that is instructive. There was a real Buddhist saint called Milarepa. He was seeking enlightenment. His guru set him the task of building a tower, carrying stones on his back, laboring tirelessly. All the while, Milarepa saw that other disciples were learning teachings, reading sacred scriptures, talking with their teacher. He asked when he was going to get the chance to do all that. But his guru knew what was right for Milarepa. Milarepa became fully enlightened, far surpassing the other disciples. His karma was to build the tower.

While it may look like we have it harder than others; while it may look like others get a bigger piece of the pie than us, we don’t know. Consider Jesus’ words to Peter. Peter asks Jesus about the

Apostle John, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus replies, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” Putting aside the issue about the second coming, I read Jesus’ response in the light of His words, “What is that to you?” And, “Follow me.” Peter’s concern is not Jesus’ relationship with John. Peter needs only follow Jesus in the way that is proper for Peter. So need we.

The story about the mother of Zebedee’s sons can be read in the light of the story about the laborers. The mother of James and John asks for her sons to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in the next life. Jesus’ response is that only those prepared by God to do so, can sit at the right and left hand of Jesus. She thinks that heavenly bliss and power can be given by request. But our eternal life depends on the life we live here—the spiritual progress we make in our regeneration. Our lot in the next life, “is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” Our eternal bliss is according to our relationship between us and God. No one else can intervene between us and God,—not saints, not priests, not ministers,—our eternal welfare is between us and God. We find our eternity according to our way of following Jesus.

The conclusion of the James and John story is important. Whatever power we have, we are not to “lord it over” others. This points to abuses of power. The lowest hellish lust is the craving to dominate, or control, or rule over others. The highest heavenly love is to rule from a love of service. This means that we are all servants to everyone else. It may sound strange, but a leader, a Prime Minister, a President, a King, is a servant—a servant of the people. Jesus’ words, talking about Himself, capture this idea well, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

The temple in Jerusalem was the holy centre of worship in Israel. At the temple one sacrifices animals, and donates money to support the priests who serve there. Since you need animals to sacrifice, why not buy them at the temple? Since Jerusalem is an international city, and people from all different nationalities would sacrifice animals, why not have currency exchange there, taking, of course, the appropriate service fee? No! The temple is spiritual, it is God’s home on earth. It is not a source of profiteering and money-making. I looked at the account of Jesus clearing the temple in all the other Gospels. No where does it mention that Jesus is angry. While turning over tables looks dramatic, we do not have anger as a motivating passion.

Children shout out blessings to Jesus, and call Him Son of David, or, in other words, the Messiah. The priests complain to Jesus about this. Jesus cites Psalm 8:2, that children speak the truth about God. Children do believe spiritual matters more than adults. They say the most shockingly honest things, at times. They haven’t developed the social filters and, indeed, deceptions that adults have. While it is likely that the children were just mimicking what the other adults were saying, their words are true in this case.

Cursing the fig tree seems to be a very human response of Jesus to a barren tree. It looks like Jesus is getting mad at a tree. Likely, this is a symbol about people who don’t do good deeds, i.e., bear fruit. Equally difficult is the teaching that we will be able to do miracles equal to Jesus. And even cause a mountain to be cast into the sea. A mountain, in a bad sense, means self, or ego. Throwing it into the sea means regenerating and dissolving self into love for God. This is indeed a miracle, a greater and more significant miracle than moving a physical rock.

The chief priests and elders ask Jesus about His authority. By what authority does this common craftsman presume to teach? Jesus was not born into a priestly family. Jesus was not brought up as a rabbi. So who is He to teach?

Jesus’ power is in the truth of His words. People have an internal recognition of truth, and we resonate when we hear it, and when we witness love in action. John the Baptist had immense power,

given by God,--not by a divinity school, or rabbinical teaching. The priests had John the Baptist killed, and they did not recognize his authority. But the people did. And, fearing for their reputation among the masses who believed in John the Baptist's authority, the priests refuse to speak against John. Jesus sees their duplicity and refuses to tell them that God gives Him His authority.

## Lesson XIII

### Matthew 21:

#### The Parable of the Two Sons

<sup>28</sup> "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

<sup>29</sup> "I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

<sup>31</sup> "Which of the two did what his father wanted?"

"The first," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

#### The Parable of the Tenants

<sup>33</sup> "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. <sup>34</sup> When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

<sup>35</sup> "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. <sup>36</sup> Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. <sup>37</sup> Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

<sup>38</sup> "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' <sup>39</sup> So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

<sup>40</sup> "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

<sup>41</sup> "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

<sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

the Lord has done this,

and it is marvelous in our eyes'<sup>[b]</sup>?

<sup>43</sup> "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. <sup>44</sup> Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."<sup>[i]</sup>

<sup>45</sup> When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. <sup>46</sup> They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.

## COMMENTARY

The first story about the two brothers raises a challenging issue. The story praises those who deny but do, and denounces those who affirm but do not. Jesus tells us specifically whom He is talking about. He says that tax collectors and prostitutes follow John the Baptist in the way of righteousness. Presumably, those who profess belief would be the religious authorities, the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees.

I am inclined to generalize this story to today. Today we do not have tax collectors in the same sense that Jesus' day did. We do have prostitutes. And we do not have Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees. I described the story in very general terms above: those who deny but do; those who affirm but do not.

Can we say that people who live well, do good deeds, love their neighbor but do not profess belief in God may be among those saved? Is this too far a generalization? From another angle, tax collectors and prostitutes are sinners according to Jews in Jesus' day. Yet they follow the ways of righteousness that John the Baptist teaches.

Two issues arise for me. Are these fallen people living a life of love for their neighbor in the only way society leaves open for them? Are they receptive of the life Jesus shows; do they welcome truth; have they repented of sins that are in their power to repent of? Secondly, does Jesus recast judgement? Does Jesus overturn the metrics we judge by? Is Jesus saying that those who appear to be sinners may not be; while those who appear to be righteous may be sinners.

As I study human behavior, I am becoming uncertain about metrics of judgement I have used in the past. Upstanding, civilly lawful citizens may lack compassion for others. May feel superior to others. May look down on other people who have less than they do. While people who are broken, homeless, on public assistance may have more humanity in their hearts than upstanding citizens.

Even religious people may harshly judge other people. The threat of self-righteousness and feelings of superiority loom over the heads and hearts of believers. I have known people who do not break laws, and even religious leaders who have committed adultery. I think that the resolution of these issues is to see humanity as a mixture of good intentions and deeds and evil intentions and deeds. When Jesus said that those without sin could stone the adulterous woman, everybody dropped their stones and walked away. I think we all have sin and righteousness in us. I think we all need to repent and ask God's mercy, and we all need to do whatever good is in our power, by God's grace, and feel heaven's joy in the measure we know it. But we must abstain from judgment of others, in terms of whom we think is good, whom is sinful, whom deserves our respect, whom we look down on, whom we feel superior to. None of these judgments stand, and we are in no position to make these judgments. Swedenborg says that we need remain ready to befriend when people repent, when those who look sinful in our eyes are shown to be righteous.

The story of the vineyard draws on well-established metaphors. The Hebrew Scriptures use vineyards as symbols of the people of Israel. So when Jesus talks about the owner of a vineyard, He is talking about the relationship between God and the Jews. This comes out clearly in the parable.

The managers of the vineyard refuse to give the fruits of the land to the owner. They murder and mistreat the owner's servants and even his son. The managers are metaphors for the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. They are not leading their people to God. They are, in fact, opposed to God's ways.

This follows the preceding story. The Jewish leaders did not follow John the Baptist. The sinners were open to his teachings and to repentance. Jesus' language is strong. He suggests replacing the managers with other ones who are faithful to the owner. This clearly is a metaphor for unseating the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees. In fact, Christianity did arise and become a widespread world religion, eclipsing even Judaism from which it grew.

## Isaiah 5:

I will sing for the one I love  
 a song about his vineyard:  
 My loved one had a vineyard  
 on a fertile hillside.  
<sup>2</sup> He dug it up and cleared it of stones  
 and planted it with the choicest vines.  
 He built a watchtower in it  
 and cut out a winepress as well.  
 Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,  
 but it yielded only bad fruit.  
<sup>3</sup> "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,  
 judge between me and my vineyard.  
<sup>4</sup> What more could have been done for my vineyard  
 than I have done for it?  
 When I looked for good grapes,  
 why did it yield only bad?  
<sup>5</sup> Now I will tell you  
 what I am going to do to my vineyard:  
 I will take away its hedge,  
 and it will be destroyed;  
 I will break down its wall,  
 and it will be trampled.  
<sup>6</sup> I will make it a wasteland,  
 neither pruned nor cultivated,  
 and briers and thorns will grow there.  
 I will command the clouds  
 not to rain on it."  
<sup>7</sup> The vineyard of the LORD Almighty  
 is the nation of Israel,  
 and the people of Judah  
 are the vines he delighted in.  
 And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;  
 for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

## Amos 5:

<sup>16</sup> Therefore this is what the Lord, the LORD God Almighty, says:



“There will be wailing in all the streets  
and cries of anguish in every public square.  
The farmers will be summoned to weep  
and the mourners to wail.

<sup>17</sup> There will be wailing in all the vineyards,  
for I will pass through your midst,”  
says the LORD.

<sup>18</sup> Woe to you who long  
for the day of the LORD!  
Why do you long for the day of the LORD?  
That day will be darkness, not light.

<sup>19</sup> It will be as though a man fled from a lion  
only to meet a bear,  
as though he entered his house  
and rested his hand on the wall  
only to have a snake bite him.

<sup>20</sup> Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—  
pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

