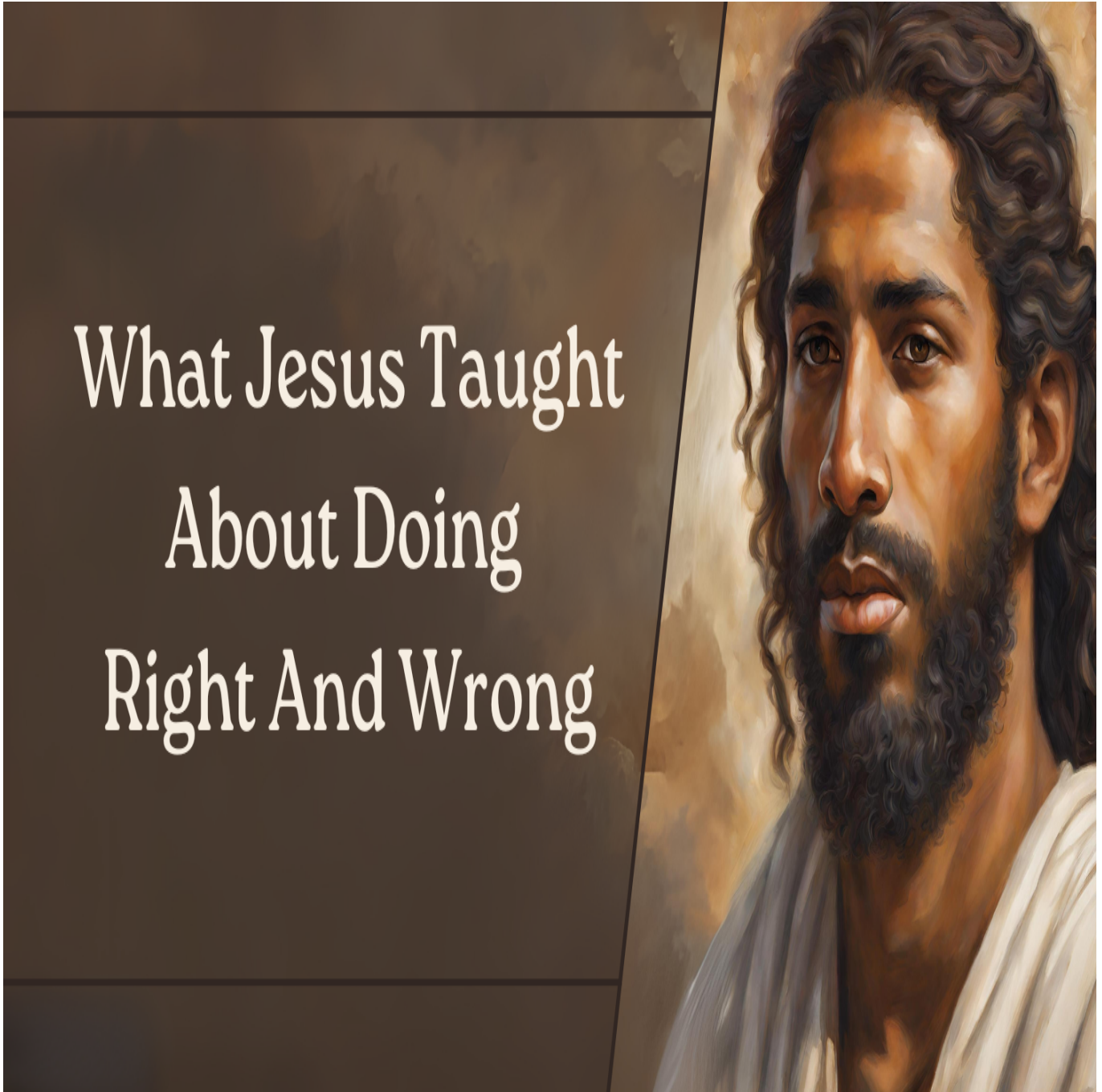


# What Jesus Taught About Doing Right And Wrong

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## **Introduction**

What Jesus taught about doing right and wrong is quite simple, yet it is not often understood. He straightforwardly stated the importance of the subject, yet the moral principles he explained are barely ever discussed. All Christians recognize that Jesus is our Savior from sin, yet what that means is far from agreed upon. Furthermore, it doesn't often take into account Jesus' own teaching about sin and righteousness.

Should we do right and avoid doing wrong? Most would say, "Yes!" And, as we'll see, Jesus, of course, agreed with this. But let's take this further. Is it *possible* to do right and to avoid doing wrong *consistently*? Here, most would say that this is impossible, at least while existing in mortal, sin-affected bodies. Is it *necessary* to do right and to avoid doing wrong in order to gain everlasting life? Many are uneasy at a question like this. On one hand, salvation by works is clearly a "No." On the other hand, most know it doesn't make sense to say people can do whatever they want, no matter how sinful, and still expect to receive eternal life.

As we'll see in this article, the common Christian answers to these last two questions have little to do with Jesus' own teachings. What Jesus taught about doing right and wrong is either ignored, watered down, or subordinated to later developments in Christian theology.

The goal of this article is to lay out, in simple terms, Jesus' teachings on practical morality as found in the Gospels. And we'll see that his teachings provide straightforward answers to

questions like: “Is it possible to consistently do right and avoid wrong?” “Is it necessary to do right and avoid wrong in order to be granted everlasting life?” and “What is the means by which one can overcome wrongdoing and succeed at implementing rightdoing?”

Since many Christians have the idea that our works are of secondary importance (at best) when it comes to matters of eternal consequence, we’ll start by showing that Jesus stressed the importance of actually *doing* right and avoiding *doing* wrong.

## Jesus’ Emphasis on Practical Morality

### Jesus Continued John the Baptist’s Teaching About Repentance

1 In those days, John the Baptizer came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” . . . 8 Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance! 9 Don’t think to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I tell you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down, and cast into the fire.” . . . 13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. . . . 4:12 Now when Jesus heard that John was delivered up, he withdrew into Galilee. . . . 17 From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, “Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” – *The Gospel of Matthew* 3:1-2, 8-10; 4:12, 17<sup>2</sup>All Scripture quotations from [The World English Bible](#).

Comment: There are a few things to take note of relative to this passage.

First, John the Baptist called people to repent. Repentance is returning to devotion to God; it is turning from sin to righteousness (Ezekiel 18:30; Acts 3:19).

Second, John’s teaching regarding repentance is explicitly related to practical deeds. This is clear from his injunction to *produce fruit* worthy of repentance. He warned that his hearers would be mistaken to take refuge in their association with Abraham. Their national identity and religious profession meant nothing if they didn’t have the fruits of righteousness to evidence their genuine repentance.

Third, those who failed to produce good fruit would be cut down. Clearly, this presents good works as something much more than “optional.” The absence of good works would result in forfeiting participation in God’s Kingdom.

Fourth, Jesus continued to teach John’s message of repentance. This is plain in the passage quoted above, but also from other statements of Jesus. For example, in Matthew 7:17-19, he is even recorded as saying, “every good tree produces good fruit, but the corrupt tree produces evil fruit. A good tree can’t produce evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree produce good fruit. Every tree that doesn’t grow good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

” This is unmistakably John’s teaching continued by Jesus.

### **Jesus Valued Obedience to God More Than Association With Himself**

31 [Jesus’] mother and his brothers came, and standing outside, they sent to him, calling him. 32 A multitude was sitting around him, and they told him, “Behold, your mother, your brothers, and your sisters are outside looking for you.”

33 He answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34 Looking around at those who sat around him, he said, “Behold, my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and mother.” – *The Gospel of Mark 3:31-35*

Comment: Earlier in this passage, we learn that Jesus’ family thought he was insane (Mark 3:21), making it evident that they weren’t on board with his mission—a fact also mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament (John 7:5). As such, they weren’t obeying the word of God that Jesus himself was delivering. Strikingly, the fact that they weren’t *doing* the will of God but instead acted in opposition to his work was weighty enough to warrant no longer recognizing them as part of his *true* family. According to Jesus, to be part of his *true* family requires *doing* the will of God. Notice, the decisive factor isn’t “*professing*” to believe in God or “*accepting*” the idea that Jesus is the Savior of the world. What warrants one to be recognized as part of Jesus’ family is *doing* God’s will. This is also stated in the following passage.

27 It came to pass, as he said these things, a certain woman out of the multitude lifted up her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which nursed you!”

28 But he said, “On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it.” – *The Gospel of Luke 11:27-28*

Comment: Not merely *hearing* God’s word but *doing* it is what Jesus considered blessable. The next passage further explains this distinction.

### **To Hear and *Do* vs To Hear and *Not Do***

46 “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and don’t do the things which I say? 47 Everyone who comes to me, and hears my words and does them, I will show you who he is like. 48 He is like a man building a house, who dug and went deep and laid a foundation on the rock. When a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it was founded on the rock. 49 But he who hears and doesn’t do, is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great.” – *The Gospel of Luke 6:46-49*

Comment: Plainly, the difference between the two men in Jesus’ illustration is that one *did* what he heard, while the other *didn’t do* what he heard. To actually act out in practical works the teachings of Jesus is portrayed by him as a matter of great consequence. And notice, those who don’t do

what they hear Jesus say aren't only those who overtly oppose him, but they include those who call him "Lord." In fact, from the introduction to the illustration, it's clear that the hearers Jesus primarily had in mind are those who acknowledge him as Lord! So while Christians often give 'accepting Jesus as Lord' priority over works, Jesus himself gave works priority over this acknowledgement.

### **Curing (Not Reconceptualizing) Sinners**

15 ...many tax collectors and sinners sat down with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many, and they followed him. 16 The scribes and the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why is it that he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?"

17 When Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." – *The Gospel of Mark 2:15-17*

Comment: The analogy between Jesus' work for sinners and physicians' work for the ill would be rather odd if what he had in mind was that the sinners would continue sinning while he would ensure that God would now look at them as though they were righteous. A doctor who would hide disease rather than heal it should be ousted, not honored. The plain meaning of Jesus' analogy is that he intends to heal sinners of their practice of sinning. He would produce a change in the sinner, not merely a change in how God regards them. This is further confirmed by the fact that his explanation of what it means to treat the sinners is to call them to repentance, which we have already shown to be a practical turning from wrongdoing to rightdoing. The sort of healing Jesus granted to those suffering from various bodily infirmities was a real, practical healing. Surely his work of healing people from sin would be no less real and practical.

### **Keep The Commandments to Inherit Eternal Life**

16 Behold, one came to him and said, "Good teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

17 He said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."

18 He said to him, "Which ones?"

Jesus said, " 'You shall not murder.' 'You shall not commit adultery.' 'You shall not steal.' 'You shall not offer false testimony.' 19 'Honor your father and your mother.' And, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' " – *The Gospel of Matthew 19:16-19*

Comment: We'll return to this saying and its fuller context in a future section, but for our present focus it's worth noting that Jesus straightforwardly declares that keeping the commandments is a condition for gaining eternal life. The specific commands listed include both *doing* right deeds and *avoiding* wrong deeds. It should be uncontroversial, then, that Jesus taught that our works—our literal actions of doing right or wrong—are of great consequence for our eternal welfare. Keeping

the commandments fits a person to inherit eternal life while disobeying them would naturally unfit a person for eternal life.

### **If You Believe and Love Jesus, You Will Do His Works**

12 Most certainly I tell you, he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also; and he will do greater works than these, because I am going to my Father.

...

15 If you love me, keep my commandments.

...

21 One who has my commandments and keeps them, that person is one who loves me.

...

23 Jesus answered him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word.

...

24 He who doesn't love me doesn't keep my words. – *The Gospel of John* 14:12, 15, 21, 23, 24

Comment: It is as though these words were uttered and written deliberately to disabuse people of the notion that Jesus accepts belief in him without the practical *doing* of his *works*. And they are equally well-designed to repudiate the idea that he condones sentimental attachment to him that isn't grounded in the implementation of the principles advocated in his words and commands.

All this to say, even though many Christians keep clear of stressing the importance of practical right-doing and wrong-shooing, Jesus didn't. He made it plain that working righteous works and turning from (forsaking) unrighteous works is of greater importance than merely hearing his words. It is more important than national or religious associations with God's people; more important than associating ourselves with him on the basis of family or even religious profession (acknowledging him as Lord). He made it clear that he intends to heal sinners from their sinning and that repentance from sin and keeping God's commandments is a prerequisite for enjoying eternal life in God's Kingdom. He declared that if we truly believe him and love him, we will keep his words and work his works.

## **What Jesus Taught About Our Potential for Moral Perfection**

In this section, we'll examine Jesus' teachings regarding the standard of moral character that is possible for us to attain and carry out in practice. As his statements make plain, he taught that it is indeed possible to consistently do right and avoid doing wrong. There is no hint in his teachings

that moral perfection is impossible or that it is a standard reserved for the hereafter. On the contrary, the moral standard he called people to is so high (reaching even to heaven) that it is generally deemed impossible to attain. Indeed, Jesus himself said it is impossible *of ourselves*, but granting this, he immediately showed that this inability need not be a barrier to moral perfection by declaring that what is impossible with man is possible with God.

Even though we didn't point it out earlier, Jesus' statements we considered in the previous section already furnish us with evidence that he advocated the possibility of, and potential for, moral perfection. So, let's start with some of those statements.

### **John-The-Baptist Style Repentance—No More Bad Fruit**

17 From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, "Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." . . . 16 By their fruits you will know them. Do you gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree produces good fruit, but the corrupt tree produces evil fruit. 18 A good tree can't produce evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree produce good fruit. – *The Gospel of Matthew 4:17; 7:16-18*

43 "For there is no good tree that produces rotten fruit, nor again a rotten tree that produces good fruit. 44 For each tree is known by its own fruit. – *The Gospel of Luke 6:43-44*

Comment: As we showed earlier, while these teachings were spoken by Jesus, they were first proclaimed by John the Baptist. As such, they were part of Jesus' message from the very beginning of his ministry. And as you can see, it is a serious call to repentance—a call for people to turn from sin and produce instead the good fruits of righteousness. It stands to reason that Jesus wouldn't spend his time and energies calling people to turn from sin unless he thought such a thing were possible. The fact that he taught such a message demands that he thought it is possible to be a good tree and as such, he thought it was possible to cease producing bad fruit and produce instead only good. And please do take note of the fact that his statements indicate that a good tree (a good person) produces *no bad fruit* (no bad works). Again, he said, "a good tree can't produce evil fruit" and "there is no good tree that produces rotten fruit, nor again a rotten tree that produces good fruit." Thus, according to Jesus, it truly is an either/or situation. In fact, he said, "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree corrupt and its fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by its fruit." (Matthew 12:33) If a tree could produce both good and bad fruit, then you couldn't know the tree by its fruits. But according to Jesus, you can know a tree by its fruits, and therefore, it must be the case that a tree doesn't produce both good and bad fruit.

To make things as unambiguous as possible, the simple truth of Jesus' teaching regarding the good and bad trees and their fruit is that it is possible, and imperative, to be a person who does only what is right and who avoids doing any wrong. He didn't urge people to remain the same overall sort of person (the same kind of tree); he urged them to become a different kind of person (a good tree, not a bad tree). He didn't teach that we can't help but produce both good and bad fruit; he insisted that we must bring forth only one or the other. The standard isn't less bad fruit, it's no bad fruit. He also didn't say that one can continue to produce bad fruit and be declared a good tree regardless, or that God would look at the tree as if it was good even while it bore bad fruit.

No! Jesus taught that the fruit reflects the character of the tree. We can and must become good trees, and we can and must produce good fruit and *only good fruit without any bad fruit*. This is Jesus' teaching about what is possible for our moral character and behavior: an undeviating doing of right and avoidance of wrong.

### **It's Possible With God**

17 As he was going out into the way, one ran to him, knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder,' 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not give false testimony,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and mother.' "

20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth."

21 Jesus looking at him loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me, taking up the cross."

22 But his face fell at that saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one who had great possessions.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into God's Kingdom!"

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus answered again, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter into God's Kingdom! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into God's Kingdom."

26 They were exceedingly astonished, saying to him, "Then who can be saved?"

27 Jesus, looking at them, said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God." – *The Gospel of Mark 10:17-27*

Comment: What is our moral potential according to Jesus here? As we noted earlier, Jesus didn't hesitate to uphold *doing* God's commandments as a condition for entering God's Kingdom and receiving everlasting life. And the doing of these commandments, according to Jesus, can't be partial. The rich man said he had kept the commandments that Jesus listed. Jesus' response was, "One thing you lack." This one thing was enough to keep this man out of the kingdom. By saying, "Go, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven," Jesus clearly indicated that the rich man wouldn't have treasure in heaven so long as he failed to do this "one thing" he lacked. The man could have objected, "It is only one thing! No one is perfect!" But Jesus demanded moral perfection. Nothing could be held back. Whoever would follow him has to take up their cross—which is to be willing even to be crucified. Elsewhere Jesus said, "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it." (Mark 8:34-35). Jesus and the good news (his message—the truth he proclaimed) must be cherished more than life itself. This allows for no retention of selfishness and no retention of sin. Those who continue to hold on to even one thing more highly than truth cannot enter God's kingdom. One can no more enter the kingdom with "one thing" morally defective than a camel can go through the eye of a needle.



The disciples were shocked at Jesus' words. If entering God's Kingdom requires living up to a moral standard that can't tolerate a lack of moral integrity in even one thing, who could possibly be saved? Here, Jesus holds forth hope. While one sin is enough to keep someone out of the Kingdom, he says it *is* possible to be saved with God. Let's make sure there is no mistake on this point. By saying, "with men it is impossible, but not with God," Jesus wasn't saying, "Psych! Everything I just said about moral perfection as a condition for entering God's Kingdom doesn't really apply because God has made it possible to enter His Kingdom without stopping sinning after all!" It should be obvious that this wasn't his point. Jesus didn't run after the rich man and tell him that he can retain his riches and still be saved—that God has made it possible for him to inherit eternal life while still lacking his "one thing." No! Jesus' message isn't that God allows us to circumvent the requirement for moral perfection; it is that God enables us to satisfy the requirement for moral perfection. Saying it is possible to be saved with God isn't saying it is possible to be saved with sin. Jesus' point is that even though we can't meet the high standard of moral perfection in our own strength, God can enable us to meet the standard and thus be fitted to enter His Kingdom. Through depending on God and learning His ways as revealed in the gospel, one can give up every vestige of selfishness and render perfect obedience to His commandments, which is to do right and avoid doing wrong without deviation (to produce only good fruit with no bad fruit).

### **Our Works Can and Should Be As Jesus' Works**

12 Most certainly I tell you, he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also; and he will do greater works than these, because I am going to my Father. – *The Gospel of John* 14:12

Comment: This is the last of the texts from the previous section that we'll consider. The plain idea here is that those who believe in Jesus will do his works. This tells us something not only about Jesus' concern that his followers put moral principles into practice, but also about the heights of moral behavior to which we might attain. Far from suggesting that Jesus had a degree of moral perfection that's beyond what the rest of us could hope for, Jesus here places squarely within our reach the capacity of doing his works and even going beyond them! About himself, Jesus said,

"the prince of the world comes, and he has nothing in me." (John 14:30)

"as the Father commanded me, even so I do..." (John 14:31)

"I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love." (John 15:10)

and,

"Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46)

All of these statements have the potential to be true of a follower of Jesus, so long as that follower internalizes and puts into practice Jesus' words. Remember, he said, "he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also." This is just a little before saying what he did concerning himself in John 14:30-31. And his full statement in which he said, "I have kept my Father's commandments," is, "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love" (John 15:10). And a little before saying, "Which of you

convicts me of sin?” (implying he didn’t sin), he said, “Most certainly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is the bondservant of sin” (John 8:34). The obvious implication is that if one is to no longer be a bondservant of sin, that one can no longer continue to commit sin. So, is it possible for one to cease being a bondservant of sin? To this, Jesus says, “If therefore the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36) Decidedly, then, Jesus not only claims freedom from sin for himself, but he also claims the ability to set his followers free from sin. And, as if to make certain that he isn’t speaking of a nominal (name-only) freedom, but of a practical reality, he doesn’t merely say, “the Son will make you free” but adds, “you will be free indeed.” By saying “you” he emphasizes that the freedom from sin he speaks of is a freedom that is actually experienced by the individual. And by saying, “indeed,” he emphasizes that it is to be a matter of fact—not an illusion and not merely a legal status. In other words, Jesus can set someone free from sin so that they no longer commit it and so no one will be able to convict them of sin, just as they could not convict Jesus of sin.

Jesus also said, “He who follows me will *not walk in the darkness*, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). And, “This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their *works* were evil. For everyone who *does* evil hates the light and doesn’t come to the light, lest his *works* would be exposed. But he who *does* the truth comes to the light, that his *works* may be revealed, *that they have been done in God*” (John 3:19-21). Mark what these words convey: To follow Jesus is to *not walk* in darkness—to *not do* evil—to *not* have evil *works*; it is to *do* the truth—to have *works* that can be *revealed* as having been *done in God*, just like Jesus’ works are done in God. And we should all know what this means—complete obedience to His Father without deviation:

“*I do nothing of myself, but as my Father taught me*” (John 8:28)

“*the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father doing.*” (John 5:19)

May those who follow Jesus do the same: doing nothing of themselves but bearing all their fruit (all their works) *in him*.

“Remain in me, and I in you. As *the branch can’t bear fruit by itself* unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you, unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. He who remains in me and I in him bears much fruit, *for apart from me you can do nothing.*” (John 15:4-5)

Notice that Jesus said the same thing concerning his followers in relation to himself as he said concerning himself in relation to his Father. It should thus be evident that we should understand both sayings in the same way. For Jesus, it is granted that these expressions not only reveal his utter dependence on his Father but also the fact that his living in full dependence on his Father entails that he never acted independently of his Father—he never acted contrary to his Father’s will. Jesus’ application of the same language to his followers makes plain that the same can and should be true of them; they can and should be utterly dependent on Jesus and thus never act independently of him—never act contrary to his will.

## **Sin No More**

14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “Behold, you are made well. Sin no more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” – *The Gospel of John 5:14*

11 ... Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. From now on, sin no more.” – *The Gospel of John 8:11*

Comment: Jesus doesn’t say, “From now on, sin isn’t accounted to you,” nor does he say, “Sin less often” or “Commit *certain sins* no more.” His statement is plain: “Sin no more.” If, after hearing this statement, a person chose to sin even once more, would they be obeying Jesus’ command? The straightforward answer is no. To sin again would be to sin more, not to “sin no more.” The fact that Jesus told people to “sin no more” entails that he believed that it’s possible for people to live without continuing to sin. Jesus’ injunction to “sin no more” is so simple and so plainly in favor of the idea that we can live without sinning, that his teaching on the subject should be unmistakable.

## **You Can’t Serve Two Masters**

13 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to one and despise the other. You aren’t able to serve God and Mammon.” – *The Gospel of Luke 16:13*

Comment: As we saw earlier, “everyone who commits sin is the bondservant of sin” (John 8:34). Since one cannot serve two masters and one who sins is a servant of sin, the conclusion is unavoidable that one who sins isn’t a servant of God. To be a servant of God, then, entails no longer being a servant of sin, which means no longer committing sin. Just like with the good and bad fruit, this is an either/or situation; serving God cannot be mixed with serving sin. None will deny that Jesus advocated serving God, but for this to mean much, we need to understand this in light of his own teaching regarding what it means to serve God—unreserved and undeviating obedience with no intermixture of sin.

## **The Greatest Commandment—Entire Consecration**

34 But the Pharisees, when they heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, testing him. 36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

37 Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 A second likewise is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” – *The Gospel of Matthew 22:34-40*

Comment: Like in the previous passage, Jesus here promotes entire consecration to God. To love

God with your whole being and with all your energies and affections leaves no room for loving sin. It leaves no room for turning from God, even for a moment, to commit immoral acts—whether by deeds, words, or thoughts.

The second command, taken in its simplicity, excludes selfishness, which excludes a whole world of sins. When we consider this second command in connection with the first, it becomes clear that one's love for their neighbor must be saturated in love for God, since love for God is to be all-consuming. This shows that Jesus' idea of the love we ought to have for our neighbor is principle-based, not sentiment-based. If all we have is the common, sentimental attachment to a friend that leads to compromising faithfulness to God and to truth, we don't have the love Jesus was speaking of. The sort of love Jesus advocated is a love that is ever consistent with moral integrity; it is a love much like that described by Paul—patient, kind, envyless, prideless, shunning impropriety, not seeking its own way, not rejoicing in unrighteousness, but rejoicing in truth (1 Cor. 13:4-6).

Lastly, the love for God and neighbor Jesus speaks of in this passage is a love which is consistent with God's law. In fact, he says the whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. A logical deduction from this is that keeping these two commandments entails keeping all the instructions given through the law and prophets. It likewise follows that one cannot violate any instruction given through the law or the prophets without violating these two great commandments. Once again, this highlights Jesus' teaching regarding entire consecration—unreserved and undeviating obedience to every command of God, which is nothing short of moral perfection in practice.

### **Your Righteousness Must Exceed That of the Scribes and Pharisees**

17 “Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill. 18 For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. – *The Gospel of Matthew 5:17-20*

Comment: It would be difficult to read this without realizing that Jesus is holding up an incredibly high standard of righteousness. Yet, there's one aspect over which many get confused. Some interpret the phrase “shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven” as indicating that those who break, and teach others to break, the least commandment will be in God's Kingdom, only with a lesser status. There are several reasons why we can know this is a misinterpretation:

1. If this statement was designed to indicate that commandment-breakers will be in God's Kingdom, it should say they will “be least in the Kingdom of Heaven.” But this isn't what it says. It says they “shall be *called* least in the Kingdom of Heaven.”
2. In Greek, the phrase “in the Kingdom of Heaven” modifies the verb translated as “be called;”

it doesn't modify those who break the least commandments and who are themselves called "least." In other words, the phrase "in the Kingdom of Heaven" doesn't tell us where the commandment-breakers are; it tells us where the act of calling them "least" takes place.

3. The statement that the commandment-breakers will be called "least" is introduced by the word "Therefore," which forms a logical connection between this statement and what precedes it. What precedes it is Jesus' declaration that he didn't come to destroy the law and that even the smallest part of the law won't pass away while heaven and earth remain. There is nothing about the applicability and continuance of the law that logically implies that those who break its least commandments should be permitted to enter God's Kingdom, just with a lesser status. On the contrary, the continuing applicability of the whole law implies that breaking it is as serious a crime as ever—meriting exclusion from God's Kingdom. This is expressly stated in the following verse (see the next point).
4. The statement regarding those called "least" and those called "great" is followed by another statement beginning with the word "For," which forms a logical connection between this statement and the next. The next statement (verse 20) says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." Clearly, this wouldn't make sense as a reason why commandment-breakers should be accepted as low-status citizens of God's Kingdom. It instead makes sense as a reason why they would be excluded from the Kingdom and regarded by its citizens as "the lowest of the low," or "least."
5. In order for commandment-breakers to actually be called "least" by those in the Kingdom of Heaven, they could not be among the inheritors of the Kingdom. The reason for this is that there will also be people who won't inherit the Kingdom. It's hard to imagine that there will be a class of people in the Kingdom who will have it worse than those outside of the Kingdom such that they, and not those outside of the Kingdom, will be called "least." And if you're thinking they will only be considered least *among the citizens of God's Kingdom*, recall point 2—that the phrase "in the Kingdom of Heaven" isn't indicating where "the least" are; it is indicating where the action of calling commandment-breakers "least" takes place. The most straightforward reading is that commandment-breakers are called "least" by those in the Kingdom of Heaven because those called "least" truly are the least; there is no one worse off than they. This could only be the case if the commandment-breakers are among those excluded from the Kingdom.
6. To interpret Jesus as saying those who break the least commandments will enter the Kingdom, albeit with a lesser status, would be pitting him against his own teachings as found throughout the gospels, including *The Gospel of Matthew* where this statement is found. Simply read again the statements we've already covered and those that follow in the rest of this article. If we allow consistency on the part of Jesus and the author of this gospel, we have to regard the sin-permitting interpretation of this statement as a misinterpretation.

With this misinterpretation out of the way, it should be plain that Jesus expected his followers to keep every commandment of God's law, from the greatest to the least. To break the least commandment—to lack even one thing—prevents a person from entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." To expect such a high standard of moral perfection is to regard it as attainable.

The last aspect of this passage we'll pause on for a moment is what it says regarding teaching.

Again, Jesus said, “whoever shall break one of these least commandments *and teach others to do so*, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do *and teach them* shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” This clearly addresses not only behavior, but doctrine. Jesus here discredits those who teach that it is acceptable to break any of the commandments (even the least). And he endorses those who keep, and who teach others to keep, *all* of God’s commandments (including the least). Those who claim to be followers of Jesus and who teach that it is impossible to avoid sinning (that at least some sin in “minor” areas is expected) advocate a doctrine that Jesus explicitly condemned. Those who speak against the teaching that tells people to keep all of God’s law without breaking the least commandment (without committing sin), reveal that their evaluation of moral doctrine is directly at odds with Jesus’ own evaluation. They consider advocates of moral perfection to be worthy of condemnation while Jesus declares them worthy of commendation.

### **Be Perfect As Your Father in Heaven is Perfect**

48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. – *The Gospel of Matthew 5:48*

Comment: This statement is part of the same discourse as the last statement we considered. Together, they bookend Jesus’ discussion of the law in his *Sermon on the Mount*. Matthew 5:17-20 records Jesus’ plain declaration that he did not come to abolish the law. He affirms its ongoing relevance and tells his followers that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if they would enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He then goes on to advocate this higher standard of righteousness by considering six statements from the law and their common application. In connection with each, he gives his own instructions for how to truly obey the law. In every instance, he derives from the law a moral principle and then applies that principle more broadly than what is specified in the law. While the scribes and Pharisees may have advocated conformity to the law in terms of its technical stipulations, to Jesus, this was not rigorous enough. Jesus’ approach to the law certainly affirms obeying it in its technical injunctions, but it goes far beyond that. Let’s briefly overview his discussion of each statement:

1. Murder (Matthew 5:21-26) The law says to not murder. Jesus takes the underlying principle further and says to not even allow yourself to get angry.
2. Adultery (Matthew 5:27-30) The law says to not commit adultery. Jesus takes the underlying principle further and says to not even lust.
3. Putting Away A Wife (Matthew 5:31-32) The law says that if a man puts away his wife, he should give her a written document of divorce—a safeguard against recklessly dismissing a wife. Jesus takes the underlying principle further and says to not put away one’s wife at all, except for sexual immorality.
4. Vows (Matthew 5:33-37) The law says to not make false vows, but to fulfill our vows to God. Jesus takes the underlying principle further and says we should stay true to our duty whether we’ve vowed or not. We shouldn’t need vows to bind us to honesty; we should already be bound to honesty in everything we say.
5. An Eye for An Eye (Matthew 5:38-42) The law says, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”—which limits retaliation (it’s not “a leg for an eye and a head for a tooth”). Jesus takes

the underlying principle further and says to not retaliate at all but to show those who wrong you that you aren't their enemy.

6. Love Your Neighbor (Matthew 5:43-48) The law says to love your neighbor. Jesus takes the underlying principle further and says to love even your enemy.

This is the context for Jesus' statement that we should be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. Notice—none of this is talking about God-like perfection of knowledge, power, creativity, intellectual ability, etc. The context is all about morality; it is all about doing right or wrong. Jesus takes the moral principle underlying each law and applies it not just to our actions in the circumstances specified in the law, but to our innermost thoughts and our actions at all times in all circumstances. To end this all by saying, "be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect," is to call for practical moral perfection—to instruct us to think, speak, and do what is right, without deviation, just as our Father in Heaven does.

## What Jesus Taught About the Necessity of Moral Perfection

So far, we've seen plain evidence that 1) Jesus placed emphasis on practical morality and 2) he taught that we can, with God's help, achieve moral perfection—the undeviating doing of right and avoidance of wrong. At this point, we need to turn our attention to the fact that Jesus upheld this high standard of moral character, not as a special state of holiness for those who are unusually zealous, but as a necessity for all who would enter God's Kingdom. Let's start with some selections from passages we've already considered:

19 Every tree that doesn't grow good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. – *The Gospel of Matthew 7:19*

16 Behold, one came to him and said, "Good teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

17 He said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." – *The Gospel of Matthew 19:16-17*

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into God's Kingdom!"

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus answered again, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter into God's Kingdom! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into God's Kingdom." – *The Gospel of Mark 10:23-25*

34 “Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it. – *The Gospel of Mark 8:34-35*

19 Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. – *The Gospel of Matthew 5:19-20*

Keep in mind that these quotes are taken from passages in which Jesus advocates moral perfection. Now, take note that he straightforwardly declares that moral perfection is a condition for entering God’s Kingdom and inheriting everlasting life. Those who fail to produce good fruit, to keep the commandments, to sacrifice all, and to have righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees, will not enter the Kingdom. It’s important to be clear that Jesus doesn’t say moral perfection is required of us before God will extend grace to us, nor does he say we need to keep the commandments in order for him to be willing to save us from sin. In fact, what we’ve already quoted in previous sections shows that we need God’s help, His grace, in order to be set free from sin. But, importantly, the freedom from sin God offers us is real and practical, and if we don’t avail ourselves of it, we won’t be fit for His Kingdom. This is the simplicity of Jesus’ teaching on the subject. If it seems daunting, take comfort in what we learned earlier, “Jesus’ message...is that God enables us to satisfy the requirement for moral perfection. Saying it is possible to be saved with God isn’t saying it is possible to be saved with sin. Jesus’ point is that even though we can’t meet the high standard of moral perfection in our own strength, God can enable us to meet the standard and thus be fitted to enter His Kingdom. Through depending on God and learning His ways as revealed in the gospel, one can give up every vestige of selfishness and render perfect obedience to His commandments, which is to do right and avoid doing wrong without deviation (to produce only good fruit with no bad fruit).”

### **Repent and Bear Fruit, or Perish and Be Cut Down**



1 Now there were some present at the same time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered such things? 3 I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way. 4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the men who dwell in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way.”

6 He spoke this parable. “A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. 7 He said to the vine dresser, ‘Behold, these three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and found none. Cut it down! Why does it waste the soil?’ 8 He answered, ‘Lord, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit, fine; but if not, after that, you can cut it down.’” – *The Gospel of Luke* 13:1-9

Comment: Jesus’ conversation partners were prone to think (as some are today) that victims of catastrophe must be suffering as a result of their sins. Jesus rejects this notion and directs the attention of his hearers away from the supposed faults of others to their own faults and the disaster that awaits them if they don’t repent. His repeated refrain, “unless you repent, you will all perish” makes plain that turning from sin is a necessity. He was unambiguous that sinners will perish, and he was equally clear that the condition for escaping this end is repentance—turning from sin, not merely professing faith or acknowledging him as Lord and Savior.

The parable of the unfruitful tree makes certain principles involved in this even more clear. Those who reported the incident with the Galileans who suffered under Pilate thought the disaster was evidence of guilt on the part of those who suffered. The more subtle implication of their thought process was that the absence of any disaster having befallen them seemed to indicate that they weren’t so bad. Jesus’ parable was designed to show that their present freedom from disaster in no way indicated that their moral condition was good. Instead, they had actually failed to produce good fruits, and the only reason they hadn’t been cut down yet was the mercy of God. The delay of their impending ruin was actually to give them another chance to manifest good fruits (good works unmixed with bad works). If they failed to do this, even after the merciful delay, they would certainly perish.

Jesus’ use of the imagery of the tree bearing fruit (or failing to bear fruit) would have been salient to students of his teachings and the teachings of John the Baptist. As we showed earlier, a major lesson Jesus taught through tree imagery is that we need to produce good fruit without any bad fruit—all our works need to be morally good with none of them being morally bad. That is to say, his other tree parables were designed to teach practical moral perfection. The parable of the unfruitful tree builds on this lesson; it adds the important truth that moral perfection is not only possible; it is necessary. God doesn’t immediately destroy sinners; He is merciful, patient, and even provides everything necessary for the tree to produce fruit (for a person to attain moral perfection). If, however, after all these advantages, one does not cooperate with the moral vine dresser and bring forth fruit worthy of repentance, they will be cut down.

## **Destruction of Sin or Destruction of Self**

43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having your two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire, 45 If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life lame, rather than having your two feet to be cast into Gehenna, into the fire that will never be quenched— 47 If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out. It is better for you to enter into God's Kingdom with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into the Gehenna of fire, 48 'where their worm doesn't die, and the fire is not quenched.' 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." – *The Gospel of Mark* 9:43, 45, 47-50<sup>3</sup> Verses 44 and 46 (which are each identical to verse 48) are not in the earliest and best manuscripts and so have not been included here. Verse 49b has been left out for the same reason.

Comment: Jesus' language here is vivid and intense. The main point can't be missed—you *must* put an end to your own sinning if you can expect to enter God's Kingdom and live forever; if you don't cease sinning, you will be destroyed. Someone would only cut off their own hand, foot, or eye in the most extreme circumstances—if their life depended on it. Jesus is saying that the danger we're in if we continue in sin is *that extreme*; it is a matter of life and death. And take note of the decisive factor that makes the difference between life and death. It is all about whether we retain sin or remove sin. He states this plainly. Cutting off the things that lead to sin results in living in God's Kingdom. Keeping the things that lead to sin results in being cast into Gehenna, into fire that won't be quenched. If Jesus regarded practical morality as unrelated to our eternal welfare, this statement would be very different. He could have said, "If your hand causes you to stumble, ask God to disregard your wrongdoing and to apply my rightdoing to your account." He could have said, "It is better for you to enter life by proxy, with me having done all the self-sacrifice necessary, rather than being judged by your works." This may be the religion of some, even many, but it isn't the religion of Jesus. He, with no ambiguity, declared that to continue in sin is to forfeit life.

The fate of those who continue sinning is to "go into unquenchable fire." To quench a fire is to put it out before it has a chance to entirely consume the thing being burned. For the fire to not be quenched, then, means that it utterly consumes what it is burning. The same idea is conveyed by the phrase, "their worm doesn't die." If worms that feed on a corpse die, they don't finish consuming it—some of the corpse remains. But if the worms don't die, they consume the whole corpse. This makes it plain that Jesus is contrasting two scenarios: partial destruction or entire destruction. The partial destruction is only of that part of a person that leads them to sin and, importantly, the destruction must be accomplished *now* by the person in question. The entire destruction is of the whole person if they retain their sin, and it is accomplished in the final judgment.

After laying before his hearers their two options, Jesus said, "For everyone will be salted with fire." Up to this point, he had only spoken of fire in connection with the entire destruction of sinners. But in light of the fact that those who repent also experience a partial destruction, it's easy to see why he says that everyone (including those who repent) must endure some sort of fire. And, actually, Jesus' disciples would have already been exposed to this idea from the beginning of his ministry

since John the Baptist had said about the one to follow him, “He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Luke 3:16). Fire destroys, but it also purifies. Consider these excerpts from Malachi:

1 “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me! The Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple. Behold, the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, is coming!” says Yahweh of Armies. 2 “But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire, and like launderers’ soap; 3 and he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, and refine them as gold and silver; and they shall offer to Yahweh offerings in righteousness. (Malachi 3:1-3)

1 “For behold, the day comes, burning like a furnace, when all the proud and all who work wickedness will be stubble. The day that comes will burn them up,” says Yahweh of Armies, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But to you who fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings. (Malachi 4:1-2a)

These passages provide some of the ideas underlying Jesus’ statements. We can actually know this to be the case because we have evidence that Jesus understood that this very passage was being fulfilled through the work of John the Baptist and through his own work (see Matt. 11:10). What is most relevant for our present purpose is that this section of Malachi uses fire to convey the total destruction of all who work wickedness, *and* it uses fire to describe the purifying and refining of those who will present offerings to Yahweh in righteousness.

Again, Jesus said that everyone must undergo trial by fire, some to entire destruction and some to partial destruction. The fire that purifies those who repent is likened to salt. Interestingly, salt counters both images of entire destruction that Jesus had just described. Salt kills worms, and salt withstands fire.<sup>4</sup> Technically, salt can be destroyed by fire, but in order for this to happen, the temperature needs to exceed that of ordinary fires and even most industrial fires. The fact of salt remaining after a fire is something that Jesus and his hearers would have been accustomed to. This is why Jesus said, “Have salt in yourselves.” If you have no salt, the fire will utterly consume you, and the worm will not die. If you do have salt, you won’t be utterly destroyed; the salt will preserve you. In other words, salt is the symbol of what makes the difference between partial and entire destruction.

Now, what of Jesus’ saying, “If the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it?” This statement probably makes you wonder, “Can salt lose its saltiness?” The answer is no, it actually can’t. And Jesus and his hearers would have likely known this. There’s a remarkably similar exchange in the Talmud that will help to illustrate the point.

The sages of Athens then asked another question: When salt is spoiling, with what does one salt it to preserve it? Rabbi Yehoshua [ben ?ananya]<sup>5</sup> Yehoshua ben ?ananya was a Rabbi whose life spanned the late 1st and early 2nd centuries CE. said to them: With the placenta<sup>6</sup> another translation says “afterbirth.” of a mule. They said to him: But is there a placenta of a mule? Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: And does salt spoil? – Bekhorot 8b:15, William Davidson Edition ([Sefaria](#))

In addition to being humorous, this is also informative of the fact that, in the ancient world, people knew that salt doesn’t lose its saltiness, just as they knew that mules don’t procreate. This lets us

know that when Jesus said, “If the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it?” he knew that his hearers would think something like, “What? That doesn’t make sense; salt can’t lose its saltiness!” And that was exactly what Jesus wanted to emphasize. If you submit to being salted with fire now—if you endure the trial of removing the things that lead you to sin now—you will be preserved hereafter. The lesson is simple. Sin needs to be treated with the utmost seriousness. Whatever it takes to cease sinning, it must be done; extreme action is called for since it’s a matter of life and death. To rid oneself of sin is a severe experience—it is self-sacrifice (Rom. 12:1; Lev. 2:13), being salted with fire—but it purifies one’s character from immorality just as smelting and refining removes impurities from gold and silver. With characters free from moral impurity, we can “be at peace with one another” (Mark. 9:50), having “[our] speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that [we] may know how [we] ought to answer each one.” (Col. 4:6). Only by being thus salted, and having salt in ourselves, can we have the promise that we will be preserved for as long as salt stays salty. This is making a “covenant of salt” with God, which is an everlasting covenant (Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5; Is. 55:3).

### **The Fate of Those Who Work Iniquity**

23 One said to him, “Lord, are they few who are saved?” He said to them, 24 “Strive to enter in by the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter in and will not be able. 25 When once the master of the house has risen up and has shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ then he will answer and tell you, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ 26 Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ 27 He will say, ‘I tell you, I don’t know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity.’ – *The Gospel of Luke 13:23-27*

21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will tell me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, in your name cast out demons, and in your name do many mighty works?’ 23 Then I will tell them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you who work iniquity.’ – *The Gospel of Matthew 7:21-23*

Comment: The teaching of these passages is very straightforward—those who work iniquity will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Calling Jesus “Lord” doesn’t change this, nor does teaching or prophesying in his name or doing mighty deeds. The thing that makes one fit to enter the kingdom is plainly stated to be *doing the will of God*. And it is specified that this does not leave room for working iniquity. You might think the implication is that the Kingdom is only for the few—an elite class who have the special skill of being able to achieve moral perfection. But notice, Jesus doesn’t answer the question as to how many will be saved. Instead, he frankly relates the conditions for entering God’s kingdom and pairs this with an admonition to “Strive to enter in.” The implication is that if you obey his admonition, you will meet the conditions and thus enter. As we discovered earlier, Jesus taught that our own strength is unable to make us morally perfect, but with God, we can attain moral perfection and enter the kingdom. Jesus said that many who seek to enter will be unable, but this is because many who seek *only* seek, and not with much rigor. Jesus makes no similar remark regarding those who go beyond mere seeking—those who strive.

The term “seek” is very broad. While it can mean a thorough and energetic search, it can also refer to looking for something with very little effort. To “strive,” on the other hand, is to make every effort, to agonize with everything you have to achieve the goal. Those who strive will not let anything lead them away from depending on God and doing his will. They will not only call Jesus “Lord,” but they will treat him as such, which of course includes obeying him and refusing to work iniquity. Not just a few, but all who do this will enter the Kingdom. So, rather than being discouraged over the fact that moral perfection is a requirement for entering God’s Kingdom, we should rejoice, knowing that God sent Jesus for the very purpose of enabling us to meet the requirements. In light of this, when Jesus says, “Strive,” you can in confidence **strive**, knowing it won’t be in vain.

### **The Wicked Will Be Weeded Out**

36 Then Jesus sent the multitudes away, and went into the house. His disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the darnel weeds of the field.”

37 He answered them, “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, 38 the field is the world, the good seeds are the children of the Kingdom, and the darnel weeds are the children of the evil one. 39 The enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 As therefore the darnel weeds are gathered up and burned with fire; so will it be at the end of this age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom all things that cause stumbling and those who do iniquity, 42 and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. – *The Gospel of Matthew* 13:36-43

Comment: This explanation of the well-known *Parable of the Weeds* specifies that the weeds are “the children of the evil one.” From elsewhere in Jesus’ teachings, we can know that those who merit this label are those who do evil (John 8:38, 41, 44). This is actually made plain right here in this passage since Jesus calls them “those who do iniquity.” In contrast, the good seeds are “the children of the Kingdom,” also called “the righteous.” Notice, the contrast is not between those who associate with Jesus and those who don’t; it is between those who *do* what is right and those who *do* what is wrong. The lesson is concisely summarised in something Jesus says later in *The Gospel of Matthew*: “the Son of Man will come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will render to everyone *according to his deeds*” (Matt. 16:27). In light of this, it can’t honestly be denied that it is *necessary* to do good deeds and avoid doing wrong deeds.

### **The Gospel Net—Catching Isn’t Keeping**

47 “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some fish of every kind, 48 which, when it was filled, fishermen drew up on the beach. They sat down and gathered the good into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49 So it will be in the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing

of teeth.” – *The Gospel of Matthew* 13:47-50

Comment: Importantly, the fish under consideration are those that have been caught in the gospel net. This shows that both the good and bad fish are professed followers of Christ—both classes have been fished out of the waters of the world (Isa. 57:20). But being caught doesn't guarantee being kept. Like in the *Parable of the Weeds*, the wicked (those who do wrong) will be cast out, while only the righteous (those who do right) will be kept for the Kingdom. And to make the matter even plainer, we are told that the angels will “separate the wicked *from among* the righteous.” In the context of the world, the righteous are *among the wicked*. It is only in the context of professed Christians (those caught by the gospel net) that the wicked are *among the righteous*. So, to be taken from the world by the gospel does not itself fulfill the requirements for inheriting God's Kingdom; one must also be the right sort of fish—one that does right and doesn't do wrong.

### **Entire Consecration is Necessary for Eternal Life**

25 Behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?”

27 He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

28 He said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live.” – *The Gospel of Luke* 10:25-28

Comment: This passage has a lot of overlap with texts we've already considered. From *Matthew* 19:16-19, [we saw](#) that Jesus answered this question by saying, “keep the commandments.” Our focus at the time was just on the fact that Jesus placed emphasis on practical morality. Later, [we considered](#) *Mark* 10:17-27 and saw that Jesus answered this question, again by pointing to the commandments, but going further to teach that with God, it is possible to achieve moral perfection—to not lack moral integrity in even one thing. [We also saw](#) from *Matthew* 22:34-40 that Jesus regarded entire consecration to God and love for one's neighbor to be the two greatest commandments. We observed that the whole-hearted nature of this love leaves no room for sin. If one sins, it manifests that some part of them is not wholly devoted to God and some part of them is lacking in love for their neighbor. This leaves us with the unavoidable conclusion that entire consecration is nothing short of practical moral perfection. What the present passage contributes is uniting the command for entire consecration to the question about eternal life. Specifically, it clarifies that practicing entire consecration is what must be done in order to inherit eternal life.

### **You Must Be Born Again to Enter God's Kingdom**

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.”

3 Jesus answered him, “Most certainly I tell you, unless one is born anew, he can't see

God's Kingdom.”

4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

5 Jesus answered, “Most certainly I tell you, unless one is born of water and Spirit, he can’t enter into God’s Kingdom. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Don’t marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ 8 The wind blows where it wants to, and you hear its sound, but don’t know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus answered him, “How can these things be?”

10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and don’t understand these things?

11 Most certainly I tell you, we speak that which we know and testify of that which we have seen, and you don’t receive our witness. – *The Gospel of John 3:1-11*

Comment: It’s easy to see that this presents being “born again” as necessary for entering God’s Kingdom. But it’s worth considering more closely what this means. First of all, Jesus reiterates the idea of being “born again” with the words, “born of water and Spirit” and uses the expression “born of the Spirit” a couple times. The first instance—born of water and Spirit—is telling, since it forms a connection with an idea introduced in the first chapter of this gospel.

26 John answered them, “*I baptize in water*, but among you stands one whom you don’t know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, who is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I’m not worthy to loosen.” 28 These things were done in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

29 The next day, he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who is preferred before me, for he was before me.’ 31 I didn’t know him, but for this reason I came *baptizing in water*, that he would be revealed to Israel.” 32 John testified, saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending like a dove out of heaven, and it remained on him. 33 I didn’t recognize him, but he who sent me to *baptize in water* said to me, ‘On whomever you will see the Spirit descending and remaining on him is he who *baptizes in the Holy Spirit.*’ (John 1:26-33)

The idea that John the Baptist would baptize with water, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit is also known from other texts (Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5; 11:16). The Pharisees, such as Nicodemus, rejected John’s message and weren’t baptized by him (Luke 7:29-30). As we’ve seen from the start of this article, the messages of John the Baptist and Jesus were designed to prepare people for the Kingdom of God, so it should be no surprise that Jesus tells Nicodemus to receive the baptisms enjoined by John and himself. This is especially the case since to be baptized actually served to initiate the baptizee into the community as a disciple, or student, of the baptizing teacher. Consider these passages:

...Jesus was *making and baptizing* more *disciples* than John... (John 4:1)

Go and *make disciples* of all nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19)

Then those who gladly received his word were *baptized*. There were *added* that day about three thousand souls....The Lord *added to the assembly* day by day those who

were being saved. (Acts 2:41, 47)

For in one Spirit we were all *baptized into one body*, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all given to drink into one Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:13)

These texts show that baptism made someone a disciple (a student) and joined them to the community of believers. In this connection, it's also worth reading 1 Cor. 1:10-16 and observing that it assumes the understanding that a person would be a follower of the one who baptised them. [7](#)See also 1 Cor. 10:2, which says that the Israelites were baptized "into Moses." Part of what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus addressed the community aspect specifically. Remember, Jesus said, "we speak that which we know and testify of that which we have seen, and you don't receive our witness" (John 3:11). The word "you" here is plural. Jesus is contrasting Nicodemus's movement (the Pharisees) with his own. Jesus' movement was a segment of John the Baptist's disciples who had advanced yet another step, but the Pharisees had rejected John and were opposing Jesus, and thus they failed to avail themselves of the very truths they needed in order to receive God's Kingdom. In order for Nicodemus to enter the Kingdom, he needed to receive the work of John and of Jesus; he needed to repent and be baptized, becoming a disciple.

Interestingly, baptism in the Spirit didn't replace baptism in water. Jesus advocated both to Nicodemus, and the record is plentiful that water baptism continued among the followers of Christ as part of admitting people into their ranks (John 4:1-2; Acts 2:41, 47; 8:12, 13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15; 18:8). But as we've seen, not all who profess Christ and join his followers will inherit the Kingdom. Beyond being born of water, one needs to be born of the Spirit. The meaning of being born of the Spirit is spelled out more plainly in some of the writings of early Jesus-followers.

3 For we were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love toward mankind appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us through the washing of rebirth<sup>8</sup>The WEB reads "regeneration" but I modified this one word since the Greek word (?????????????) is a combination of the word for "birth" plus the word for "again." and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior; 7 that being justified by his grace, we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:3-7)

This passage brings together the language of washing, rebirth, and the Holy Spirit in a context focused on moral transformation. The washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit is the means by which one is saved from immorality and justified (made righteous) and thus made eligible to inherit eternal life. Here's one more passage to make plain the meaning of the new birth. The fact of its necessity should be obvious.

7 Little children, let no one lead you astray. He who does righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. 8 He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. To this end the Son of God was revealed: that he might destroy the works of the devil. 9 Whoever is born of God doesn't commit sin, because his seed remains in him, and he can't sin, because he is born of God. 10 In this the children of God are revealed, and the children of the devil. Whoever doesn't do righteousness is



not of God, neither is he who doesn't love his brother. (1 John 3:7-10)

(MORE TO COME)

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- 1  
Written May 2024 – March 2025
- 2  
All Scripture quotations from [The World English Bible](#).
- 3  
Verses 44 and 46 (which are each identical to verse 48) are not in the earliest and best manuscripts and so have not been included here. Verse 49b has been left out for the same reason.
- 4  
Technically, salt can be destroyed by fire, but in order for this to happen, the temperature needs to exceed that of ordinary fires and even most industrial fires. The fact of salt remaining after a fire is something that Jesus and his hearers would have been accustomed to.
- 5  
Yehoshua ben ?ananya was a Rabbi whose life spanned the late 1st and early 2nd centuries CE.
- 6  
another translation says “afterbirth.”
- 7  
See also 1 Cor. 10:2, which says that the Israelites were baptized “into Moses.”
- 8  
The WEB reads “regeneration” but I modified this one word since the Greek word (?????????????) is a combination of the word for “birth” plus the word for “again.”