

The Perfect Comfort of His Glorious Kingdom

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading. You'll find it in Luke's Gospel at chapter 16. If you have one of our church visitors Bibles, that's page 875, I think, page 875.

And we're reading at Luke chapter 16 and at verse 14. And we're reading through to chapter 17, verse 10, and you'll see that this is the last of the four discourses of Jesus in this particular section of Luke's Gospel where all the focus is on the perfection of the coming kingdom that Jesus is bringing.

You'll see at chapter 7, verse 11, we have another one of those little marker posts that Luke has all the way through the Gospel telling us when we start a new section and reminding us that Jesus is on a journey and he's teaching his disciples as he goes.

And so this last section here points us once again, as he's been doing through all of these chapters, to the kingdom of God and its coming as a great celebration, as a banquet, as a feast, full of great comforts for the people of God.

But not, alas, for everyone. So let's read at chapter 16, verse 14. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and that is what Jesus had just been saying about the impossibility of serving God and money or mammon, the things of this world.

[1 : 32] The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.

For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were until John. Since then, since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone is forcefully urged into it, to enter it.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void.

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.

And he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.

[2 : 52] Moreover, even the dogs, unclean animals, came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, in hell, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame. But Abraham said, Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things.

And Lazarus, in like manner, bad things. But now he is comforted here and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able and none may cross from there to us.

And he said, Then I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them lest they also come into this place of torment.

[4 : 08] But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them. And he said, No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

He said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. And he said to his disciples, Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come.

It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea, then that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves.

If your brother sins, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times saying, I repent, you must forgive him. The apostle said to the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord said, If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.

[5 : 27] Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he's come in from the field, Come at once and recline at table? Will he not rather say to him, Prepare supper for me and dress properly and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink?

Does he thank the servant because he did what he was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, We are unworthy servants.

We've only done what was our duty. Amen. May God bless to us. This is word. Well, let's turn, shall we, to Luke's gospel, chapter 16, and the passage that we read there, beginning at verse 14, which through to chapter 17, verse 10, is all about the perfect comfort of Christ's kingdom.

All through these chapters that picture the coming of the glory of Christ's kingdom, we've seen a great sadness. And that is that some will miss out on this perfection of glory.

They'll endure the agony of seeing others, people the world over, feasting at table in the kingdom of God, and yet themselves cast out, says Jesus.

[6 : 56] Because, and this is the really sobering thing, because they have excluded themselves. Like the guests in the parable in chapter 14, kept out by their love of property, or possessions, or their passions.

But remember, Jesus said, Anyone who doesn't renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. Or like the eldest son in chapter 15, who would not share the glory of heaven at the rescue of lost sinners, and so wouldn't enter into the joy of his father's house.

I would have gathered such as you, says Jesus, but you would not. Because you cannot serve God above all things, and love and serve yourself above all things.

Nailed a son claimed to be serving, enslaving for his father, but the truth was, as we saw, he was serving, enslaving for himself, for material reward, for recognition. He wanted the fatted calf for himself.

Serving mammon, serving the stuff, the currency of this world, which may be money and possessions, but may be for many people equally something else.

[8 : 08] Power, or position, or education, or success, or your dream, or whatever it might be. And sadly, you see, there are many people like the eldest son, who think they're pursuing God, and pursuing what he wants, but in fact, are just worshipping at the shrine of mammon, of worldly satisfactions, be they material, be they intellectual, be they even theological.

But look very hard at chapter 16, verse 13. No servant can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Now, of course, this world, our world, and our worldly-minded hearts, tend to ridicule that kind of definitive statement. Look at verse 14. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, ridiculed him. But even devoted disciples of Jesus, deep down in our hearts, we think we can somehow serve God, and still have a fair regard, a fair attraction, for our own ambitions, our own cherished goals in life.

But look at verse 15. God knows your hearts. And so Jesus warns his disciples, too, in chapter 17, verse 3, pay attention to yourselves.

[9 : 33] And so in this final discourse of this section, Jesus lays out a challenge both to the proudly religious, the Pharisees, and to those who are personally responsive to Jesus, to his disciples.

And he talks very plainly about the perfect comforts of his coming kingdom, but once again warns very clearly that not all who may think they will inherit these comforts will in fact find them to be theirs.

Verse 25 of chapter 16 is very stark. Look at it. There is wonderful comfort for some, and yet for others, says Jesus, there will be anguish, torment, burning, and certainly infinite regret.

And so this is a wake-up call from Jesus, this passage, to examine our hearts. Because Jesus' kingdom is coming, and whoever we are, God really does know everything that's in our hearts.

And Jesus' message is very plain. The perfect comforts of his heavenly kingdom, which are infinitely wonderful, they will belong only to those who in their hearts truly revere God's commands,

and who from their hearts truly reflect God's grace.

[10:58] Look first at verses 14 to 31 of chapter 16, which is directed at the proudly religious Pharisees. And it's all about truly revering God's commands.

And again, Jesus' message is absolutely plain. Don't think you can be saved, he says, if you don't truly revere the commands of God, most completely revealed in Jesus Christ, his Son.

God knows your hearts, verse 15. And if your hearts really do belong to God, then his gospel commands will truly shape your attitude to everything, including, and perhaps especially, your attitude to things like marriage and money.

Or to put it more starkly, to sex and to silver. Things that are very often uppermost in men's minds, especially powerful men like some of these Pharisees were.

And the two things, in fact, that are flagged up specifically by Jesus here in this passage that confronts just such men, the Pharisees. Jesus' repeated message all the way through this gospel is that his people are those who hear the word of God and do it.

[12:10] These are my mother and sister and brothers, he said, back in chapter 8, verse 21. These are those who build themselves and their future on a rock that will stand in the judgment.

Chapter 6, verse 47. That is the whole Bible's message, friends. It is the doers of the law who will be justified, says Paul in Romans chapter 2, not those who justify themselves before men, as Jesus says here in verse 15.

And to hear God's word and do it means that you will be someone who truly loves the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

And therefore, that heart love to God will be visible in your love to your neighbor whom you will love as yourself. That's what Jesus told the scribes back in Luke chapter 10 before demonstrating exactly what that looked like.

Remember, in the parable of the Good Samaritan. And that's what all the scriptures teach again and again and again from beginning to end.

[13:14] The law and the prophets as Jesus calls the Old Testament scriptures here in verse 16. Now please notice something very important here. Look at verse 16, the law and the prophets. Now look down to verses 29 and 30 at the end.

Do you see what do we have there? The law and the prophets. Moses and the prophets. And that brackets this whole section because Jesus is teaching that it is our attitude to the word of God and to what it really teaches that is the key to his whole message here.

All scripture, according to Paul in 2 Timothy 3 and there he is meaning particularly the Old Testament, the law and the prophets. All scripture is able to make you wise for salvation through faith because it all comes to a climax in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the full and final revelation of the word of God and who is the fulfillment of the saving work of God.

That's what Jesus says here in verse 16. Do you see the law and the prophets prophesied until John who was the last and the greatest of all the prophets according to Jesus and since then he says the gospel of the kingdom is proclaimed by Jesus himself.

It's arrived and so everyone is forcefully urged into it. The footnote reading I think is the better one. That's exactly what we've been seeing in these chapters, isn't it? Remember chapter 13 verse 24.

[14:42] Strive, says Jesus, now to enter the narrow door. There's a greater urgency than ever because the great day of the Lord is imminent.

It's arrived and Jesus is urging people to respond now before it's too late. Respond to everything that the law and the prophets, everything that the whole Bible has been saying from the very start. Repent, he says, of your resistance to God's rule in your lives and believe the gospel, believe the account of his kingdom and its demands.

The kingdom of God is here and you must respond. But, verse 17, do you see, do not make any mistake about this, says Jesus. That does not mean for one second that obedience to God's word is somehow now a matter of no consequence.

How could that possibly be so? God's true kingdom people are those who love him and who love his words and who hear his words and do them. And so, those who truly love God will always truly revere his commands.

[15:53] And Jesus says in verse 17, heaven and earth will pass away before one dot of God's commands. One dot of his way of true and real righteousness and holiness for human beings before it's voided.

Don't be ridiculous, this Jesus, thinking that can happen. Don't call me Lord and not do what I tell you, he said. No good tree produces bad fruit.

That's absurd. So don't think that you can hide behind pious religious talk as if that means that you're right in God's eyes. You might fool men, he says, and justify yourself before them, but verse 15, God knows your hearts.

He knows whether you truly love him and he knows whether you're truly loving your neighbor as yourself, especially if your neighbor is weak and vulnerable and fragile.

especially if he's a little one. God knows. See, it's very easy, isn't it, to slip into justifying yourself before others, justifying yourself to yourself.

[17:07] It is, pay lip service to God's commands in the Bible, even to manipulate the Bible so that you can feel that you're doing right, but actually you're just doing what you want to do.

And that was the Pharisees. they twisted the scriptures to their own destruction, to use Peter's phrase, because the truth is they loved themselves in their hearts, not God.

You see, real love to God is so often revealed by our attitude to God's word and our actions with our wallets.

And for men, especially powerful and influential men, that's very often revealed in this whole area of sex and silver. And that, I think, explains verse 18.

You see, the headings in our Bibles make it look as if that's a separate little piece that seems rather out of place in the middle of this section. But I don't think it is at all because Jesus is challenging men who twist God's words to suit their own self-love and their own desires.

[18:12] And so often in men's hearts a twisted and selfish attitude of greed for sex and for silver go together.

Now, these Pharisees were guilty of abusing women, abusing them just to suit their own selfish desires. The rabbis had come out with all sorts of ways to make it easy for a selfish man to just get rid of a wife he didn't want and to take another one that he did want.

They abused and exploited the vulnerable place of women and they did it just to serve their own selfish ends, their own appetite for sexual mammon. And they twisted God's law so that they could justify themselves before men so that they could be squeaky clean, good, upright, law-keeping Pharisees and yet still get the divorce that they wanted and the new sexual relationship that they wanted.

Henry VIII was really very adept at doing exactly that, wasn't he? In our country. But look what Jesus says in verse 18. Adultery is still adultery to God even if you can manipulate God's word to make it seem lawful to yourself and to everybody else.

Perverse and selfish and self-serving sexual relationships are still perverse even if you change the law and call it bona fide marriage.

[19:42] That's what Jesus is saying. Isn't it extraordinarily contemporary to read this on this very day? That people should think that if you change the name of something and call it something good and healthy then it becomes good and healthy.

And so what was recently regarded wrong, unnatural and perverse is now called marriage and then all of a sudden everything is wonderful. Not only in the law of our nation but now alas also in the law of our national church.

But you see human beings do that all the time don't they? And we see it all around us in society today. So what was once dangerous drug use is now being remolded as recreational activity.

Adultery is now very often just being called an open view of marriage. Family breakdown is nicely called alternative family life. And so on and so forth.

Maybe we should rename cancer. How about alternative health? Would that work? Let's rename stealing and call it redistribution of resources.

[20:56] And isn't the emperor's new cloak really wonderful and beautiful? No, says Jesus. Adultery is still adultery. Whatever you call it however you justify it.

And selfish and self-serving attitudes to sexual relationships are still self-serving and sinful. Whatever you might pretend them to be. as is a selfish and self-serving attitude to silver.

And you see because they loved their silver their money verse 14 Jesus told them this very penetrating story beginning at verse 19. It may actually be a true story for all we know.

Certainly it's told in figurative terms but unlike all Jesus' other parables this story actually has a character in it who's named Lazarus. At any rate it's about two very different men viewed from

earth's eyes and viewed with heaven's eyes.

So the first one in verse 19 is very rich. He has fine clothes. He has a marvelous home with wonderful gates. He feasts every day. Surely such a man must be greatly blessed by God is what you'd think.

[22 : 07] The other man verse 20 is very poor Lazarus. He's sick covered in sores. He's hungry and he's religiously unclean.

He's licked by these unclean dogs. Surely surely a sign that this man is cursed by God. But of course men don't see the heart.

Both men die. And the first great shock is in verse 22. Do you see Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom in heaven. Isn't that amazing?

Who would have thought it that God did love this miserable creature after all? And the second shock comes in verse 23. And the rich man isn't in heaven.

Who would have thought that? He seems so favored by God on earth. Verse 24 says he's in hell in torment in the anguish of flames.

[23 : 07] And just as Jesus said back in chapter 13 verse 28 he had the added agony of seeing Lazarus comforted and realizing his own loss.

But why? Why is Lazarus in heaven and the rich man in hell? Well perhaps that's why Lazarus is named in this story because his name in the Hebrew is Eleazar.

It means God helps. And he is an utterly dependent man, isn't he? Utterly dependent upon God's mercy. And God saves him and shows him mercy.

There's no suggestion that he's saved just because he's poor. The point is rather that he is saved despite everything that the world would have assumed possible for someone like him.

Because our assessment of people is so often so wrong. But God sees the heart. And he knows his man. And the rich man likewise is not in hell because he's rich.

[24 : 12] No first century Jew would have seen riches as something to be despised. No, the surprise is that his earthly blessings were not a sign that he was justified in God's eyes.

Because God sees the heart. And this man's problem was that his worldly wealth, his mammon, had become his master.

And had in fact stopped him serving God as his true master. Because as Jesus said, you cannot serve God and mammon.

And his wealth had blinded him and indeed deafened him so that he didn't hear the word of God and he didn't repent. That's why he's in hell. Verse 30 is absolutely plain, do you see?

In hell he realizes why, but it's too late. He hadn't repented. And neither had any of his five brothers. And that's why he's in hell and that's why they're going to be in hell too, unless they repent.

[25 : 13] But do you see that although this man realizes this, still, still, he doesn't think the scriptures are of any value at all. What he wants for his brothers in order to save them is a spectacular sign.

Send Lazarus back to warn them to repent. But do you see what Abraham says? No, they have the scripture, says Abraham.

Let them hear them. But no, says the man in verse, that if that's no good, they need something more than the scriptures. No, says Abraham.

And no, says Jesus. If they won't hear Moses and the prophets, if they won't listen to God's word in scripture, even the evidence of a resurrection from the dead will never convince them.

You see, he is in hell because he would not hear and heed the very message that God had sent him to bring him to repentance. He ignored the word of God.

[26 : 19] He heard the scriptures plenty, of course he did in the synagogue, but he didn't respond. He didn't do the word. I'm sure he believed in heaven and hell in theory, but he never really thought in his heart that he was ever going to be in any danger of going to hell.

Certainly he never thought that taking God's commands really seriously was all that important. He wasn't one of those fundamentalists, one of those extremist evangelicals who was talking about the Bible all the time.

But God knows our hearts, says Jesus. And hearts that are his will revere his commands, will respond to his words, will repent and bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

I wonder if we all really believe that, sitting here this morning. The Pharisees were Bible people, and they didn't really believe it. Jesus told this story to shock them into self-examination.

Was there any sign of fruit in keeping with repentance in their lives? We need to be careful, don't we? Because we're not told in this story that the rich man was ever particularly harsh or callous towards Lazarus.

[27 : 35] We're not sure whether he did eat the leftovers from his table or whether he didn't. Rather seems implied, at the very least, that the man was pretty self-absorbed and did very little for him.

But Jesus is certainly not saying that all the rich go to hell. This is not an anti-capitalist rant. The climax, as we've seen in verses 29 to 31, are absolutely plain and explicit.

The issue is whether somebody hears and responds to God's message in Scripture. But we are, I think, in this story being shown very clearly where the attitude of verse 14 will end up.

This is the inevitable end of a heart that serves mammon and not God in this world. And the end, says Jesus is hell for eternity.

And of course, you can serve mammon, you can worship mammon, whether you actually have it or not. In fact, many who have very little can live through their whole life consumed by envy and desire for mammon so that it shapes their life, whether they have it or not, so don't let's be fooled.

[28 : 54] But this man is in hell because there is no evidence in his life that he ever took God's commands in Scripture seriously. He seemed oblivious to others.

He seemed to think that what he had was for him. His clothes, his food, his home, everything else. He just seemed as somebody who was oblivious to others, even Lazarus, whose name he knew and who was right under his nose.

friends, we have to be very searching of our own hearts, don't we? Because even in a church, it's easy to be like that. Some folk are very rich in their friendships, in their relationships, in their popularity, in many things that they have that others would love to have.

And maybe we don't see others who are lonely, or who are awkward or find it hard to engage with others and make friendships for all kinds of reasons, perhaps because they've got language issues, perhaps for other reasons.

Perhaps they're just people who are hard to love because they're wounded in life and those wounds put people off, as I'm sure Lazarus' sores put people off.

[30 : 12] Remember, this story is a challenge to people who knew their Bibles like the back of their hands. but just didn't seem to be doing the Bible in their lives.

What a great opportunity God gave this man to make friends for eternity with his unrighteous mammon, like in the story we saw last time. But he didn't. Because I suppose it would have interfered far too much with his way of life, with his family time, with his hobbies, with his date nights, with his me time, to use that ghastly phrase we hear today, which surely was invented in hell.

See, real self-giving is unthinkable, isn't it, to the self-centered, natural human heart. Yes, it is. Someone has put it, it costs to give oneself away in truly Christian manner.

when it comes to the point, self so often wins. But Jesus says, don't think you can be saved if you don't revere God's commands, revealed most fully in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his way of discipleship.

Take up your cross and deny yourself and come and follow me. That's what he says, isn't it? And doesn't he himself reveal the true heart that every follower must also share?

[31 : 51] Unless they're just a fraud, justifying themselves to themselves and to others and fooling others and even themselves. But not God, says Jesus, because God sees our hearts.

This rich man left all his comforts behind. But he took with him his heart, his true character, what he'd become. The attitudes he'd adopted and maintained now confirmed and perpetuated for all eternity.

And you see, there just is no place for such in God's heaven. And Jesus says, a great gulf is fixed between that attitude and the attitudes of heaven.

And perhaps the worst of the torment described here is not the physical anguish, although that's real as verse 24 makes plain. But the worst surely must be the consciousness of what might have been.

Look at verse 25. Child, remember, says Abraham. Friends, there are no memory-blunting drugs in eternity. There's only the agonizing consciousness forever and ever of a memory of reality that rises up to condemn.

[33 : 09] so that the abject horror of hell is made all the more unbearable by the ever-present knowledge that it was all your own doing.

And it need not have been this way, but that now it's too late. It's a very disturbing message, isn't it? I'm disturbed by it.

but it's a clear message and it's an unmistakable one that horrific loss is possible and that what stands between a human being and this picture of horrific loss is the gospel, the word of God, the scriptures, the law and the prophets and indeed for us also the testimony of one who has risen from the dead and proclaimed the truth.

that's all anyone needs says Jesus to hear that word and to do it with a penitent heart, with a loving heart.

That is enough to make anyone wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It's enough to equip us for every good work, to show forth the fruit of hearts touched by grace, hearts that truly love and serve, not ourselves, but the Lord Jesus Christ as master, so that his words are cherished in our hearts, so that they shape everything, not least in our attitudes to marriage and money, whether we have these things or not, and other things that so often do betray where our hearts really do seek and find their fulfillment.

[34 : 54] fulfillment. It's a challenge, isn't it? But having challenged proud religion in the form of the Pharisees, Jesus also warns those who are already personally responsive to him.

And he turns to his disciples in verse 1 of chapter 17 and he reminds them that if those who will inherit the perfect comfort of his kingdom, who will receive the comfort in the bosom of Abraham, if they must be people who are revering God's commands, so also they must have hearts that are truly reflecting God's grace.

And his message here in these verses is just as plain. Don't think you can be saved if you don't reflect the grace of God revealed most completely in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pay attention to yourselves, he says in verse 3, because in true kingdom people it will be the grace of the gospel that truly shapes your attitude to everyone and especially your attitude to sin and service in Christ's church and among his people.

Jesus warns everyone who would be a disciple to watch themselves because the stakes are so very high and scornful neglect of God's word, he says, will lead you to hell.

[36 : 15] It will lead you to utter separation from the everlasting comforts of his kingdom. And so wrong heart attitudes to Jesus are deadly, deadly serious things and therefore we must cherish attitudes that are right in our thinking to ourselves, about ourselves and about others in his church.

Don't be like the Pharisees, Jesus is saying. Don't love yourselves and therefore show that you truly hate others, that you're callous with other people and their needs.

people who are really servants of mammon and not servants of the living God. Don't be like that. Now true disciples will be like their master and they will reflect the real grace of God in all their dealings with other people.

And that will be seen very practically, says Jesus, in both loving sinners for God and in our loving service for God. Verses 1 to 4 are all about loving sinners for God, aren't they?

And true followers of Jesus will do that, he says, by not leading others into sin, but instead leading them out of sin. Just because, as we've seen, the eternal consequences are so great.

[37 : 29] Don't lead others into sin, says Jesus, with all the terrible consequences that will bring. Temptations to sin, he says, in verse 1 will come. Literally, that word is stumbling blocks.

If you go back and read Leviticus chapter 19, you'll see that a long list of commands there is summed up in the great famous command, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And one evidence of hating your brother in that chapter is that you would put a stumbling block in front of a blind person so they'd fall over in the road.

And Jesus uses that vivid image to show how wicked and how callous it is to lead others into a road that will ultimately lead them to hell. He's saying to us, don't be naive, don't be surprised.

Sin happens in the church. Is that a surprise to you? Don't pretend it doesn't, says Jesus. It's a reality in this fallen world, but watch yourself and don't let you be the cause of that sin.

It's far better, says Jesus here, to have a terrible untimely death than to have on your conscience that you lead one of his little ones on the road to hell.

[38 : 41] stumble. It's clear from the parallel passage in Matthew chapter 18 that the little ones referred to here are believers in Jesus.

Perhaps especially they're new believers, vulnerable ones, who are prone to stumble, often early on in their new find life. Don't you cause them to stumble, says Jesus.

What would cause them to stumble? Well, certainly false teaching will cause new believers to stumble. And the New Testament letters are full of warning against that kind of damage.

And we've got to watch out for that. But again, in Matthew chapter 18, when Jesus is talking about these little ones, his focus is on something else. And I rather think that's the focus here too. There he talks about not receiving little ones who are his, snubbing them, treating them maybe as inferior, perhaps not really belonging as one of us properly.

Perhaps seeing them as a bit tainted or even untouchable. Perhaps because of their background, perhaps because of the stigma, the sores that they bear that tell us of their background, rather like Lazarus' sores told of his.

[40 : 00] But watch out, says Jesus, imagine if your attitude of censoriousness or snobbery towards my precious little ones could be the very thing that would turn them aside and cause them to stumble and set their foot on a road that will ultimately lead to eternal destruction.

Imagine if that was on your conscience. see friends, before we say certain things, before we give certain disapproving looks to people, before we even think certain thoughts about a little one who belongs to Jesus, we need to read verse two and reread it and reread it again, don't we?

And we need to shudder. But sin will happen and stumbling will occur and when it does, says Jesus, you are to lead people out of sin.

That's verses three and four. Not leave them in it, not turning a blind eye, not being soft, we are to be ready to rebuke, he says, but we are to be eager to forgive. If your brother sins, says Jesus, rebuke him.

If he repents, forgive him. Not a harsh rebuke, not enjoying the rebuke, but eager to forgive. And, look at verse four, to forgive endlessly, seven times in a day if necessary for the same thing.

[41 : 33] Notice Jesus is not preaching indulgence here, he says, if he repents, but there is to be forgiveness where sin is recognized and acknowledged and repented.

But we are to help that happen, says Jesus, not hinder it. We are to love leading people out of sin. And notice, friends, what Jesus is saying here.

Damaged human beings will stumble. They will sin very often sometimes. Some Christians don't want to be realistic about that.

They see somebody who comes to faith and they struggle on and on with alcoholism perhaps, or with some sexual sin, or with a terrible temper, or with trouble with persistent lying, or whatever it might be, and they'll say, oh, well, he can't really be converted, can he?

Or he wouldn't be like that anymore. They can't be a real Christian, can they? If they keep falling back into the same sin, they can't really be a real Christian. Now, look what Jesus says.

[42 : 34] He says you can be a real Christian and stumble back into the same sin seven times a day. Seven times a day. And we must be ready, says Jesus, to be realistic about sin, and ready to help people back when they stumble.

And not leave them drowning in the mire of their sin because we have a superior or a censorious attitude. We're to be ready to forgive. And that will help them to repent instead of making it hard for them to repent and driving them away by our harshness.

what an extraordinary challenging way that is to live, isn't it? That's what the disciples thought in verse 5.

They said to Jesus, increase our faith then, Lord. Who could be like that? You need to be patience of a saint to deal with people like that. No, says Jesus, not a super Christian, just a real one.

A saint, yes, but all believers in the New Testament are saints. And if your faith is real, says Jesus, just as even a seed contains all the life that's needed to grow a plant, so your heart is possessed by the grace of a merciful Savior, whose compassion overflows to sinners.

[44 : 03] Just as the waiting Father's compassion overflowed in mercy to his lost son and ran to embrace him and kiss him and clothe him and celebrate in his repentance.

If his seed is in you, you can do even the impossible, humanly speaking. That's what Jesus is saying. You can uproot a mulberry tree that they said would take 600 years to untangle the roots and in an instant cast it into the sea.

Because to love forgiveness and to rejoice in repentance is the characteristic of those who belong to the Father's house truly who have his seed planted in them.

And we've seen repeatedly that those who belong truly to the Father's house must reflect his grace and mercy. That's not super Christianity, that's basic Christianity.

If even the seed is there, we shall truly love sinners for God. and we'll lead them gently out of sin, not into it.

[45 : 11] We'll have a right attitude to sin in Christ's church because the seed of a merciful Savior's grace is growing in our hearts. And likewise, says Jesus, we'll have a right attitude to service because the spirit of the servant king is likewise shaping our lives, the spirit of one who came not to be served but to serve.

And that's why verses 7 to 10 are all about loving service for God. See what Jesus is saying, he's saying the same thing again. That all out devotion to serving in Christ's church, it's not for super Christians, it's just basic, it's normal, it's just our duty for all believers.

That's just what it means to be a real Christian, to serve God as your master not mammon. A servant doesn't expect to come in from his daily work that he gets well paid for and find his master just overflowing with gratitude just because he's done his job.

He doesn't expect to be told, oh forget it, just don't do any more, put your feet up, relax, have a drink, put the TV on. Of course not, he expects his boss to say, good on you, keep on doing your job.

It's not a favour, deserving rewards. And just so we're not to think we're doing God a favour if we're serving him. It's just our duty, it's what we're created for.

[46 : 37] In fact, with our rebellious nature and our sin, the very fact that we're even tolerated at all and offered the opportunity to serve God is an extraordinary privilege, a wonder. At very best, look at verse 10, even if we do all that God has commanded us and do it to perfection as if we ever could, the most that we could ever claim is that we are, honestly speaking, unworthy servants and we've just done our duty.

Can any one of us think that we could say more than that? Often, we find ourselves thinking deep down that we are actually doing God a favour by serving him, that God's in our debt.

We've done this or we've done that or we've given this amount of time to this area of church life or perhaps we've even worked full time in gospel ministry or whatever we've done, but we've done a lot and God just hasn't given me the relationship I've longed for, the family I want, the position I feel I deserve, the place to minister that I've always had as my dream or whatever it is.

And we feel hard done to. All these years I've been slaving for you and serving you Lord and you haven't even given me a kid to celebrate with my friends.

Familiar? We're just back aren't we to the older brother's attitude. The one who showed no reflection of his father's grace and betrayed the truth that he wasn't serving the father at all, he was just serving himself because he thought he was worthy and his father was in his debt and owed him.

[48 : 30] It was his brother at last, wasn't it, who came to the truth. He was the one who mouthed these words here from verse 10. I am an unworthy servant and all I desire is the merciful privilege of just being allowed to do my duty, poor as it is.

But it was he, wasn't it, who discovered the overwhelming grace of a merciful and compassionate father. It was he who entered into the perfect comfort of the father's house.

And it's only those, isn't it, who are humbled to grasp their own unworthiness and therefore to rejoice in God's grace. You will become people who reflect that grace, who radiate that grace to others.

It will be people likewise who revere God's commands just because they know that they are the life-giving commands of a merciful father, not the life-quickening demands of a heartless master. But those people, says Jesus, are my true people. Pay attention to yourselves. God knows your hearts.

[49 : 45] Are his gospel commands shaping your attitude to everything, including your attitude to sex and silver, to marriage and money?

And is his gospel grace really shaping your attitude to everyone, especially those who've stumbled into sin, and to yourself, and to your own service to Christ and his church?

church. We need to take Jesus very seriously, friends. He says very clearly, don't think you can be saved if that's not so.

The perfect comforts of God's eternal kingdom can belong only to those who in their hearts truly revere his commands and who from their hearts truly reflect his grace.

Amen. Let's pray. Gracious God, our Father, how it makes us tremble to know that you see our hearts, and yet how it comforts us also, because it means that you see, amidst all the fault, all the mire, all the failures in our duty, all the unforgiveness that we so often harbor, you do see when the seed of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, is planted within us.

[51 : 31] And you know those who are yours. And you love to make that seed grow, and to lead us in your path, and to shape us into those who love your gracious commands, and who lavish your grace and mercy on others also.

So help us, we pray, every one of us, to follow in your way, and to be those who love and who do your gracious gospel word of life.

For Jesus' sake, we ask. naknow with the god