

8 THE TRUE HEAD OF THE CHURCH: ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES

IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THE FOLLOWING:

- *The World's Claims against the Church End There*
 - *Why We Can Trust the Lord's Perfect Nature*
 - *To Give Is to Receive*
 - *The Standard for an Unselfish Life*
 - *Be a Mary, Not a Martha: The Temptation to Do Too Much*
 - *More Scriptural Promises of Reward*
 - *The Good Side of Material Wealth: Not Evil in Itself*
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THE WORLD'S CLAIMS AGAINST THE CHURCH END THERE

Jesus Christ is the only perfect, sinless person who ever lived. Not only did He die for us, He taught us in parables and proverbs of God's nature, and defined right living. He spoke strongly against Pharisees and religious scribes who convoluted Scripture with their own exhaustive list of commandments, nit-picking over little things until the spirit of God's Word had nearly disappeared. Jesus spoke out against the coercive, commodity-minded religious order of the day. He does the same today through the Scripture He, the living God, inspired and authored.

No religious authority trumps Scripture. Christ is the true head of the Church. Every word spoken by any religious authority, straight up to the Pope himself, should be tested against God's Word. We may be surprised by who comes up short (and we all do on occasion).

Reading Scripture with a devotional and a trustworthy guide will open our eyes to the truth and authority of God's word. Those who pervert it will be dealt with in God's timing, but the Lord has blessed us with an infallible, unchanging Scripture we can depend on to lead us in the right direction. Paul tells us, "We know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1). An awesome promise! The foundations of Scripture we choose to apply in our lives will never fail us, though the church fellowship can, subject as it is to human error.

WHY WE CAN TRUST THE LORD'S PERFECT NATURE

TRUST IS ESSENTIAL

We not only can wholeheartedly trust the Lord to provide and always be good, we can trust Him in order to thrive. If all our worldly wealth ultimately is "meaningless," then all pursuits that serve no Kingdom purpose come to nothing:

The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. . . . No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for safety; neither shall it deliver any by its great strength." (Psalm 33:10, 16–20)

TRUST IS OBEDIENCE

The Old Testament records countless instances when the Lord, in righteous anger, punished or threatened to wipe out the Israelites for turning away from Him to worship idols and pursue riches. Many times He promised them great treasure to come, but in their haste, they forgot Him and sought their own schemes of gain, turning to the false gods and pagan idols of surrounding nations. In His infinite patience, God rebuked His people and lovingly but sternly, through prophets and righteous leaders, brought them back to Him. You may have had periods of deep loss and disillusionment in your own life. You may want to ask yourself if perhaps your own disobedience and selfishness has brought you to these low points.

To Give Is to Receive

When we humbly devote all things to God, we find it rewarding: “Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud” (Proverbs 16:19). To place ourselves among the proud and those hungry for status is to put ourselves where envy, bitterness, and greed can tear at our hearts. We are left feeling much poorer than the most destitute among us, and our work goes for nothing.

However, when we embrace a humble, giving spirit, our work blesses those around us: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). When we give, we invest in God’s kingdom, and we begin to wait on a rich reward in heaven: “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:13–14).

To give with a humble heart is to touch the heart of God. We experience a reward that knows no bounds. The smallest kindness we do for the poor brings them many happy returns. You may be the only person in the history of a poor man’s life to be kind to him. Think about the impact you have on him. It is a much richer, much more powerful impact than anything you could ever do for yourself.

The Golden Rule is often quoted, but rarely followed: “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). We can do something with pent-up, unproductive bitterness we have stored away because of the many wrongs perpetrated against us: we can give aggressively to those in far more need than ourselves. When we give in spite of circumstance, our actions become a testimony to the faith we have in God to provide.

THE STANDARD FOR AN UNSELFISH LIFE

Throughout His ministry, Jesus endured persecution, jeers, and taunts. Pharisaical leaders even sought to stone Him for what they believed was blasphemy. But Jesus continued to minister to masses of needy and brokenhearted people. At great personal expense, He taught, healed, and loved the crowds who flocked around Him. He died on a cross as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, something even the best among us would

not do. Over the centuries, He has seen millions give their lives to Him and receive eternal life because of what He did for them.

Jesus chose to spend His life among what many of the religious leaders considered the dregs of society. He told the Pharisees He had come to heal the “sick.” Was everyone He ministered to physically ill? No, but they were hurting. They were the outcasts of society: tax collectors, prostitutes, the mentally ill, and the demon possessed. He did not judge them or pass them by. Instead, He sat with them, got to know them, ate with them, healed their afflictions, delivered them, and forgave their sins. He loved them unconditionally, and because of that love they were made well, whole in body, spirit, and mind. Jesus did not condemn.

JUDGMENT HAS NO PLACE IN RIGHT GIVING

Jesus knew the people He spent His time with were aware of their sinfulness. They lived with it every day. What they lacked was a love that could break the hold sin had on their lives, a love only Jesus could provide. They did not need to hear they were sinful; they already knew that. They needed to hear they were loved and forgiven.

What would the world be like if we followed Jesus’ example of loving the outcast unconditionally? To repeat what Solomon says, “Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud” (Proverbs 16:19). We foster a heavenly sense of community by ministering to the brokenhearted and the least of among us. It is worth repeating Jesus’ admonishment: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). Few of us internalize this passage. We glance over it, say, “That’s nice,” and then return to a Pharisaical legalism that drives us to protest homosexual rallies and abortion clinics. Jesus, however, would probably walk straight up to the homosexual, embrace him, and then spend time with him. He would dine at the home of an abortionist, for these are the tax collectors of our day.

MATERIALISM HAS NO PLACE IN RIGHT LIVING

Our hearts have no room for materialistic impulses if we are to truly live in the Spirit. We can criticize the church, but it is only an avoidance tactic. When we talk about God’s heart, uncomfortably good things start to happen, but we do not want to spoil our materialistic routine. It is a form of Stockholm Syndrome*: held captive by greed, we serve it and

look to it to protect us although it is destroying us. The way of escape is so close we can reach out and touch it. A life in the Spirit is a life lived close to the Lord and apart from the sin that holds us down. It is a journey in freedom we have never before experienced.

BE A MARY, NOT A MARTHA: THE TEMPTATION TO DO TOO MUCH

DO NOT FORGET WHO REDEEMED YOU

As we mentioned earlier, we cannot expect our giving to solve all the world's problems. The world is broken, and if we use numbers as a marker for success, we will experience discouragement. The Lord understands our temptation to do too much, to overwork ourselves in Kingdom pursuits. He tells us, "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (John 12:8). In the effort to serve to the best of our capacity, we can easily neglect the quality time we should daily spend with Him in prayer and meditation on His Word.

We can mistakenly begin to pursue Kingdom work in the same manner we pursue worldly work, believing the more work we do, the greater our reward will be. We busy ourselves lest we appear to be slackers. This perspective is not biblical. Just as the Lord valued rest during long days of ministry, we also seek oases of calm. After all, what have we gained as believers if our lives are still nothing but hustle and bustle? Solomon speaks to the fruitlessness of such travail:

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle. (Proverbs 23:4–5)

His emphatic exclamation in verse four confronts us: our riches are fleeting and lead to no great end. Instead, we should pursue what brings greater reward.

TO ILLUSTRATE: MARY AND MARTHA

The story of Mary and Martha illustrates what God finds important.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to

him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38–42)

MORE SCRIPTURAL PROMISES OF REWARD

Life in the Lord is free from worldly cares. If we are able to grasp that freedom, He promised He would not leave us destitute: "I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:9–10). We can trust our investment to reap returns: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 19:17). We can trust that the Lord will honor our cheerful giving and our willingness to minister to those in need: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

We need not succumb to bitterness when others are not doing their part, for the Lord sees and judges all. He knows our hearts better than we do, and He will give all their just reward: "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart" (Proverbs 17:3).

THE GOOD SIDE OF MATERIAL WEALTH: NOT EVIL IN ITSELF

It is important that we not see wealth as inherently evil. Instead, the evil is in our devotion to it or our dogged pursuit of it. The writer of Ecclesiastes, who claimed all was meaningless, still instructed us to enjoy what we have in the moment: "When God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God" (Ecclesiastes 5:19).

The Lord came to give us a more abundant life, so it stands to reason we should enjoy His blessings. Yes, we have turned away from a dependence on worldly things, but there are blessings in the moment,

some of them material blessings that we are to enjoy and praise Him for. He delights in the joy His gifts bring us, so do not be so wrapped in humility that you forget to be blessed.

* **Stockholm Syndrome:** a psychological response sometimes seen in an abducted person, in which the hostage shows signs of loyalty to the hostage taker regardless of the danger (*wikipedia.org/wiki/stockholm_syndrome*)

TO HELP YOU LEARN

Please complete the following statements in Part A. Then Answer the questions in Part B. You may write in your book or on separate paper. After you complete this assignment you may compare your answers with the correct answers provided in the section titled “To Help You Learn—Answers” in the back of this book. Completing this part of Lesson 8 will help you remember the important truths of this lesson.

A. COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING

1. Jesus Christ is the only _____, _____ person who ever lived.
2. Every word spoken by any religious authority should be tested against God’s _____.
3. All our worldly pursuits come to _____ if they serve no kingdom purpose.
4. We foster a heavenly sense of _____ by ministering to the broken-hearted and the least of those among us.
5. Much as the Lord valued His rest and peace during long days of ministry, we should also seek those oases of _____.

B. ANSWER BRIEFLY

1. When we live in Christ, are we free from the troubles and cares of the world? Can you list Scriptures to support this?

2. What can be the consequences of a lack of trust in and obedience to the Lord? _____

3. Can judgment serve any productive use in ministry and giving? Why or why not? _____

4. Are you a Mary or a Martha? In what situations could you be calmer and have more trust in the Lord? _____

5. How do you look at the wealth in your life? Is it a blessing or does it only bring more problems? _____
