

GOD'S CALL

Major themes in the Scriptures

Quality of being

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The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject “Quality of being”, as we seek to consider and appreciate major themes in the Scriptures.

A short summary of today's message:

The quality of our moral and spiritual being is a very important theme in the Scriptures. God created us with the intention that there should be the highest quality in our being, so that life would be most meaningful to us and we would be able to participate most fully in what God intends to do in His creation. We will seek the Lord to appreciate what this means.

Why is this subject so important? Why is it found throughout the Scriptures? Why is it that the meaning and the thrust comes through to us again and again: the quality of our being?

It may at times not be very obvious to us because the Scriptures may not use these terms “the quality of our being”. But if we seek to understand what is in the heart of God, what God is seeking to do, to bring about, to communicate to us, we will see that it is present throughout the Scriptures as a very central emphasis.

Consider for yourself a few questions that would be of great significance to you throughout your life: What brings meaning to life? What is it that brings meaning to life? We are generally very occupied with many things in this world. There are many things that come and go, there are many things that attract us, there are many things that we enjoy to such an extent that often we miss the most important issue: What is the meaning of it all? Why are we doing the things that we do? Why are we occupied in the things we are occupied with? Why are we so busy with the things that we pursue? What is the meaning of it all?

If you ask yourself this question, would you not come to see that at the heart of meaning in life is quality of being – quality in yourself, quality in others? What is it that takes away meaning? It is the lack of quality. What brings about conflict, what brings about exploitation, what brings about hatred and destruction? It is the problem of quality of being. What is it that brings about genuine love and concern, well-being? Is it not the quality of being? What is it that brings about meaningful relationships? What is it that brings about a meaningful worship of God? It has to do with quality of being.

You can ponder over this yourself and if you spend time carefully to think about it, I have no doubt that an honest consideration will lead to this conclusion: Without quality of being, there cannot be true meaning in life.

You can ask yourself another question: What do you look forward to for eternity? We believe that we are going to continue to live on in eternity. Ask yourself: What do you look forward to for eternity?

Someone said many years ago: "I do not want to live forever because I do not want to keep on existing, doing the same thing over and over again." Why is it eternity was not appealing to her? Because to her, it is just a repetition of doing the things we are doing on earth, over and over again. What meaning is there? Do we look forward to eternity so that we can live forever? Would that by itself bring meaning to us? Certainly not! Eternity can be a terrible existence if there is no meaning in it. For eternity to be something that we look forward to, there must be quality, there must be meaning; and if we do not develop that quality now, what will we have in eternity? Think about it. What are you looking forward to in eternity?

What do you want to concentrate on in your time on earth? This is a very important question for us to consider. Are we so preoccupied with the immediate concerns, with the many things we think we need to attend to that time passes by; and by the time the time arrives for us to depart from this world, we regret: "What have I done with my life?" And sometimes, we think in terms of "What have I accomplished?", "What have I achieved?"

What do you want to concentrate on? What would be valuable? What would bring you satisfaction at the end of your life? Is it not quality of being in yourself, where you can find the joy and meaning of being what you ought to be, or being the kind of person that you can respect, that you value; and if you can influence others in the same direction, where you can have meaningful friendships in this direction? Would you not want to concentrate on that?

Or would you concentrate on earning your first million by the time you are thirty, building a big house, travelling around the world, having many friends, having a name that people will remember? Is this what you want to concentrate on? Consider for yourself.

Then you can ask the question: What is it that you most appreciate in God? We say we worship God, we say we love Him; we want to do His will, we want to follow Him. Why? What is it that you most appreciate in God? Is it because you are so awed by His greatness, His power? He has created the whole universe, it is so awe-inspiring? It is so "awesome" as many people say? Is this what you most appreciate in God?

Or do you really appreciate God because of the quality of His being? A God of such great love and grace and mercy, kindness; a God who really loves us, cares for us, is prepared to go to great extents in order to help us, and that includes His going through deep suffering in order to help us to find true meaning and value in life. Is this what you appreciate in God?

Then you can ask yourself: What is it that God is most concerned about in His creation of man? When God created man, what was He looking for? What was He seeking to accomplish? If we do not appreciate this, then we may seek to do many things for God which is not really what He is concentrating on. We need to understand why God created man, what is He seeking to accomplish and how is He going to accomplish it. If we understand this, we appreciate this, then we can do our part.

So briefly, we can think about it. In our relationship with people in this world, what should be our greatest concern for others?

Is it to concentrate on delivering the people of this world from the wrath of God, to rescue them from hell? Is this our primary concern? Should it be? Is it to help them so that they can go to heaven and enjoy what God has in store for them there?

Certainly, we should be concerned for people; we should want to rescue them from hell; we should want to deliver them from the wrath of God. We should want to help them to be able to enter into heaven and to enjoy what God wants to give to them. Certainly, this is true and God does want us to have that concern for people.

But is this your greatest concern? Is this what we should concentrate on in our lives? Or is it to help them to become the best that they can be in moral quality of their being, so that they will find true meaning in life and they can walk with God and work with Him in His eternal goals? What is the primary emphasis?

We can then consider: What is God's greatest concern for man? If we appreciate this, we can align our hearts with Him. When God created man, what was His primary concern?

Is it to prevent sin in the lives of man so that He need not judge them, and He need not be angry with them and He need not send them to hell? Is this God's greatest concern when He created man? If that were so, it would not be very difficult for Him to do that. God could easily have created man, placed him in an environment, in a situation where it will be so easy for man to follow His instructions and to live happily with God without going their own way, without sinning against God, without entering into evil. Is that something very difficult for God to do? No. God can quite readily do that.

Why then did God create us so that we are living in an environment where it is so easy to sin?

Ponder over the revelation of the Scriptures. Do you think that God's primary purpose is to help man to become like Him in His moral perfection, so that we will be truly good in our moral being and become deeply one with Him, and we can develop the highest quality of friendship with Him and with those who truly love Him, and we can work together in what is good and of eternal value and meaning?

Consider whether this is God's primary concern. We can see this throughout the Scriptures, which, the Lord willing, we will consider various parts of the Scriptures that bring across this whole thrust of it: Old Testament, New Testament, God Himself speaking, the Lord Jesus, His emphasis, the apostles, what they are concentrating on, and the final book in **Revelation**.

What is it that God is concentrating on? What is He seeking to accomplish? We will look at various portions of the Scriptures that bring across major aspects in the development of man and what God expects of us and what He is seeking to bring about.

Genesis 2: 15-17

- 15 Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.
- 16 The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely;
- 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

Did God have to do that? Did God have to plant that tree in the garden of Eden and tell Adam not to eat of it? What is the purpose of it? Why do such a thing? If God's main concern is for man not to sin, is it not possible for Him to provide a situation where it will be much easier for man?

Why did God place Adam in a situation where he could be so seriously tempted and suffer spiritual and physical death when He could have given him a much easier situation without the presence of Satan, and without such a command? God made it very clear: "in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." It was a very serious issue. The consequences were very significant.

If God was more concerned about preventing sin than developing quality in being, could He not have placed Adam in the garden of Eden and forbid Satan to be present and give instructions to Adam which would be pleasant to comply with, where he could walk with God happily? For example, God could tell Adam, "Water the plants every day at 7 a.m. Gather some fruits at the end of the day." Would it not be something that Adam would be so happy to do? And He could have given him many other instructions where Adam could so happily do them and not fall into sin.

If God's primary intention is to prevent sin, there are many ways that He could have done that.

Today, we can say if God has saved us and He wants us not to sin anymore, can He not straightaway bring us to heaven where, from all that we know, people in heaven generally do not sin? Why is that so? Because of the environment: the environment is different.

Why place us in this environment where it is so easy to sin? The answer obviously is: quality of being. If God wants to develop quality of being, then He needs to give us opportunity to develop that quality. We need to be tested; we need to go through situations to consider: What do we value? What are we seeking? What do we want in life? What is important to us?

If we are given all the options that are all so very pleasant, it is very easy for us to choose the pleasant options and carry on.

But God wants us to face situations where we can be tempted to go away from His commandments: We can go our own way if we want to. The question is: Do you value God? Do you appreciate Him? Do you really want to follow Him? How far, to what extent, at what cost? That is a question that needs to be asked and has to be answered if we want to develop true quality in our being.

Consider what happened in **Genesis 3: 1-6**.

Genesis 3: 1-6

- 1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'"
- 2 The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat;
- 3 but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'"
- 4 The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die!
- 5 For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."
- 6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

God knew Satan was very powerful, very cunning, very capable. God knew that it would be very difficult for Adam and Eve to resist the temptation from Satan. And yet, God allowed Satan to be present in the Garden of Eden. Why?

The issue has to do with quality of being. To what extent would Adam and Eve obey God? How much would they value what God had said and hold on to it? To what degree would they live by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God?

We are told the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. Satan was very cunning and he still is very, very cunning. Satan worked in the garden of Eden, and he is still at work in the world today.

Why does God allow this? God wants to see the quality of our choice, what we want in life.

Satan said, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" He was very cunning. He asked the question in such a way that would provoke a response. "Has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" That kind of question very easily would lead to an immediate response. The woman wanted to make clear what did God say. The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'"

There is no indication that God said "You shall not touch it". Likelihood is Eve said what she thought without careful consideration to quote God correctly. But the issue here is that Eve responded to Satan instead of telling the serpent, "I know what God has said. I will obey Him and I am not going to talk to you. This is of no relevance to you." But she entered into a conversation with Satan and this gave an opportunity for Satan to say, "You surely will not die!"

That thought might not have occurred to Eve in the first place. When God said, "You shall surely die", likelihood was she believed it, so too Adam. But when the serpent said, "You surely will not die!", that could easily have created a doubt within her. "Could it be I will not die? It was just a warning. Maybe there is something there." And so the serpent went on to say, "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The serpent told Eve, "There is something very precious there. That is why God does not want you to eat of it. Once you eat of it, you will be like God and that is something very great. You will be as wise as God; you will know many things that you do not know now." And in that state, the serpent encouraged the woman to look at that fruit, to think about it: what could it do for her? So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate.

She knew God commanded not to eat but she chose otherwise. She chose otherwise not for any good reason but because it seemed something that she would like – she would enjoy it. She knew that God was perfect. She understood that God's way was the right way but she was prepared to go her own way.

And this has been the story of mankind until today, even for Christians. We know what is good, we understand and we believe that God is perfect, but we still would rather do the things that we think is good and we think is better, is more enjoyable, rather than listen to Him, obey Him, walk in His ways. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way. This has been the history of mankind. It is so difficult to develop quality of being. It is so easy to go our own way; it is so easy to nurture the self-life.

Notice that the tree is in the middle of the garden. Why did not God put the tree far away in a small corner so that it is not so easy to be recognized, but God placed it in the middle of the garden – every day you will see it? So too is it today. The temptations are all around us. The things of the world, the pull of the world, the thoughts of the world, the desires of the world are always there, everywhere, all around us. They confront us all the time. People talk to us, things happen, programmes, events, all these things can very readily affect us very, very rapidly.

The only way that we can really keep ourselves in the right path is to keep close to God, to remember what He has said, to be prepared to obey Him, trust Him, walk with Him, depend on Him. That is the only way that we can really develop that kind of quality. If we do not do that, we will go our own way, we will be destroyed.

We have no life in ourselves. Life comes from God – moral and spiritual life and meaning and quality, moral perfection. The only way we can become really good, of quality, is to come to God, listen to Him, walk in His ways, follow Him, abide in Him, His life abide in us. But we would rather not do that because there are much more pleasant ways of doing things, there are much easier ways of doing things.

So then, we see that God knew very clearly that the evil one would tempt Adam and Eve. But He allowed it, even though He could have prevented it if He wanted to. God had the power to forbid Satan to enter the garden of Eden but God did not. God allowed him. Adam and Eve were tested to see if they would obey God at all times, or would they choose to go their own way? This would affect the quality of their being. What choice would they make? What would they pursue?

Then we go down the Scriptures and consider another situation where Satan was present. We look at this passage because development of the quality of our being is very much related to Satan at work.

It may come as a surprise to us but that is the reality: development of the quality of our being has very much to do with Satan at work. That is because Satan is very evil, he is very cunning, he is very powerful. He will seek to destroy us. If we learn to overcome him, we develop quality of our being.

God knows that and God allows Satan to work in this world. He allows Satan to tempt us and He wants to see what response do we give? Do we love God enough to stand against the evil one? Or would we be afraid of what the evil one may do? Or would we be attracted by what the evil one may offer us? He is very cunning, he is very powerful; he can make use of the world. The spirit of the world is encouraged by Satan. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, these are encouraged by Satan all the time in the many, many things that are happening around us. God allows it because He wants to develop quality of our being.

God has a very significant objective to accomplish. Yes, because of that, there will be many casualties along the way. God could have prevented those casualties. We know that in the final outcome of things, many people would perish. The Lord Jesus tells us very clearly: "The broad way leads to destruction and many, many people will be walking in the broad way that leads to destruction. The narrow path leads to life and there are not many who will find it." Why? Because the path that leads to life requires your choice of life, your choice of what is good and the cost that goes with it.

Many people want life but they also want the world. They want to follow God but they also want to enjoy the things that the world can offer. They want to worship God but they also want to go their own way.

This cannot be. You have to choose one or the other. If you choose both, you will always end up with conflict in your heart. There will be turmoil and distress. You have to settle in your heart: What do you really want? What do you want to pursue? What do you want to give yourself for?

Let us consider this passage:

Job 1: 8-12

- 8 The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil."
- 9 Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing?"
- 10 Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.
- 11 But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face."
- 12 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD.

This conversation is a very rare glimpse into the way that God related with Satan, but it helps us very greatly to understand what is happening in this world.

Satan is always seeking to destroy us and he requires God's permission. He can only work within a certain realm. But this passage tells us that God does give Satan permission to work in many ways that to us would be very horrible, very terrible kind of situation, unbelievable. But God allows it. The God of love, of kindness, of grace, of mercy allows such a thing to happen. Why? Why does God allow Satan to do such a thing?

Notice that it is God who took the initiative, who asked the question. The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." God asked Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? Do you recognise the quality of his being – a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil"?

Job was a man of high quality in his being. Why did God not just leave him alone, let him carry on being of such high quality, being a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil?

We can see that Job's direction, his choices, were good. He chose to follow God, he chose to worship God, he turned away from evil; he wanted what was good. Isn't that good enough?

God specifically highlighted this to Satan and He knew what Satan would say. Satan may be cunning but God is wiser than Satan. God knows much, much more how to deal with Satan. So in effect, we can say that God was making use of Satan to accomplish His purpose. But it is a very painful way to accomplish that purpose. Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face."

And this is a very important principle. Satan was right in some ways, there is an issue there.

If God were to give us a very pleasant environment, it is easy for us to love Him, to walk in His ways, to follow Him. But if a difficult time comes, if there is a problem, if there is confrontation, difficulties, pain and suffering, and we do not get what we want in this world, then we may not follow God, we may not listen to Him. We may choose rather to follow the world and go our own way. This is a very important principle and God, in His wisdom, He knows this and He says, "Yes, man must be tested."

God knew what Satan wanted to do. He allowed him. Satan said, "put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face." And it is true. For many people, this can happen readily. We believe in God because of what we can get out of Him, because we can get the things we like, the things that we want. But when this is no longer there, our love for God can grow cold. We may no longer say we love Him that much.

So the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD and we read subsequently that Satan destroyed various aspects of Job's possessions, and his family members. He killed them, he destroyed his possessions. In the midst of that, we read that Job continued to trust God. So there was quality in Job. He was not trusting God solely because he had all these things. He continued to trust God, he did not blame God. But then we see what happened subsequently.

Job 2: 3-7

- 3 The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil. And he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause."
- 4 Satan answered the LORD and said, "Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life.
- 5 However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face."
- 6 So the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life."
- 7 Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

We see Job continued in his faith in God, to trust God in spite of what happened to his possessions and his family members. Now, the LORD said to Satan again, "Have you considered my servant Job?" And God knew what Satan would say. God said, "For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil."

God reaffirmed that Job was a man of quality and "he still holds fast his integrity although you incited Me against him, to ruin him without cause." This sentence may seem as if God was provoked – He was incited to do something that He did not want to do.

Obviously that is not true. God knew beforehand what Satan would do. God had planned it. That was what God was seeking to do: to test Job.

Satan thought that he would win but he lost.

But Satan could have won. If Job did not respond well, then Satan would have won. With all his afflictions, with what he did, if Job had turned away from God, then Satan would have won.

But God wanted to give Job the opportunity to develop his life. God wanted to test the quality of Job's being, the depth of his love for God and his preparedness to trust God and follow Him whatever the situation might be, and He wanted to help him to develop that quality.

Yes, Job could fail and falter but it was God's hope that in the midst of all this, Job may learn and grow stronger as a result. From his failure, could he learn to respond better, to go deeper, so that his love for God would become purer, more steadfast, stronger, and more enduring?

We can see from the book of Job that is the primary intention in God's heart: to help Job to develop quality in his being. And it was not just for Job. It is meant for all of mankind. This is just an example to help us see what is in the heart of God, what is He seeking to do.

But we can say that it is at great risk.

If Job had been taken to heaven at that point of time before he was tested, he would still be regarded as a blameless, upright man, appreciated by God, going to heaven in a very happy state. But this test, this trial, could have destroyed him.

What if Job had become bitter? What if Job lost his faith? What if Job became so discouraged and reactive? Then he could have perished. If he had denied God, if he had rejected God as a result, what would have happened to him?

We see in the book of **Job** that Job did fail, he did falter; he did say many things he should not have said. In the midst of his distress, in the midst of misunderstandings by others, in the midst of pressures from the evil one, Job found it very difficult. He cried out, he said things he should not have said.

God in His grace revealed Himself to Job, spoke to him out of the whirlwind, helped Job remember who God is, so that he could focus on God and what is the path of meaning that he should seek for. But God did not just leave it like that. God rebuked Job and told him that he had done wrong. And we are so thankful that Job's response was good. He said, "I repent in dust and ashes. Yes, I have done wrong. I should not have said those things. I went astray. Forgive me." He was humble enough to acknowledge he had gone wrong; he came to God for forgiveness and God forgave him, as a result of which Job can now stand up as an example for us of quality of being.

But we can see that this way of working that God is seeking to do can result in many, many casualties along the way. Many people would not respond well; many people would choose the way of the world. Many people would follow the evil one rather than really following God because to follow God, there is a cost.

We must consider this: Do we really value quality of being? Do we really want to be like God in the right way, developing moral quality like His?

Satan lost in this instance but in many, many situations in this world, Satan won and many people followed him. And people are still following him to varying degrees. We need to be very careful in the way we live our lives.

Let us go on to a New Testament passage and we see the approach of the Lord Jesus. What was He looking for? What was He concentrating on? How did He seek to preach the gospel to the people – the Lord Jesus, the perfect Preacher, the One who can influence people the most effective way, the One to whom we can say people should most readily respond to the message of the gospel?

If the Lord Jesus wanted to bring many people to believe in Him and to follow Him in the way that many people are doing today, it would be very, very easy for Him to have mass, big crowds following Him.

Luke 14: 25-35

- 25 Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them,
 26 "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.
 27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.
 28 For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?
 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him,
 30 saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'
 31 Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand *men* to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?
 32 Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.
 33 So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.
 34 "Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned?
 35 It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

We are told large crowds were going along with Him. And this was common. Wherever the Lord Jesus went, there were large crowds and many were appreciative of what He was doing. He fed the hungry, He healed the sick, He cast out demons, He taught them the word of God.

People, especially among the Jews, many were very appreciative of what He was doing. Large crowds would follow Him. They wanted to be His disciples.

So why did the Lord Jesus make it so difficult for the people to be His true disciples? Why did He not just welcome them, tell them, "You want to follow Me? That is very good. Come with Me. Just learn the things of God happily and just live for Him." If He were to say things like that, the likelihood would be the crowds would grow bigger and bigger; many people would follow Him.

That is happening in the world today. There are many who preach in such a way that is very attractive: "Believe in the Lord, you will go to heaven. God will take care of you. You will be prosperous."

There are many ways in which you can be encouraged: "You will be healed of your diseases. There will be miracles you can experience." There are different emphases in different people. But very often today, we bring the gospel to people in a way that will be very attractive to them. So there are many who come, who follow and we can then say, "My ministry is very successful. I helped so many people to come to the Lord. They are all going to heaven."

Is it so? The Lord warns us that there may come a day when those who thought that they would be accepted by Him would be rejected by Him. And what did He say? "DEPART FROM ME. I do not know you, you evildoers, you who break the law, who are lawless!" What was He saying? It is the issue of quality of being. Going to heaven is not just a question of coming to the Lord and saying, "I accept You as my Saviour. I want to go to heaven."

Going to heaven has to do with moral quality of being. It has to do with giving up the path of unrighteousness, giving up the world, rejecting evil and the evil one and seeking to follow the Lord and His ways because they are good. If we do not understand this, if there is no true repentance in our hearts, if we are not being transformed in the direction to be like Christ, we are moving in the wrong direction.

Let us look at what the Lord Jesus said. He turned and said to them. Why “He turned”? He turned because He was walking and they were following Him – big crowds following Him. There are many people who would be so happy: They walk, and a lot of people following them – “I’ve got a large following!”

What the Lord Jesus did was the opposite. They were following Him, He turned around and He said to them. And He said words which could be so very offensive, words which could make many people angry. But the Lord Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.”

Can we understand these words? If we do not recognise who the Lord Jesus is, if we just hear these words, we can be very repulsed by these words. “How can You say such a thing? Hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters – terrible! How can You ask us to do such a thing?” So it is very easy to reject Him and say He is teaching the wrong thing.

But that is because we do not understand what He is talking about. When we understand what is in His heart, when we know what He is concentrating on, we will understand. The words are not difficult to understand if we know what He means in His heart.

If we want to be His disciple, we must learn to reject what would be contrary to His will, what would be opposed to what He wants to do, what would go against what is morally perfect. The Lord Jesus is not asking us to hate everybody for no reason. He says, "even his own life". We are to hate even our own life.

Why? Because at the heart of our many relationships, including our relationship with ourselves, how we think of ourselves, what we want for ourselves, in all these areas, our priorities are not right, our emphasis is not right, our direction is not right. This is what the Lord wants us to correct. We have to turn away from all that contradicts the path of holiness, the path of true meaning.

God wants us to honour our father and mother; God wants us to love our neighbour as ourselves; God wants us to care for our own lives. Certainly! In the positive direction, God wants us to relate with people in the right spirit.

But here, the Lord warns us. We can and we often do relate with people whom we regard as close to ourselves in the wrong way. They are more important to us than who the Lord is. That is why in Matthew, He put it the other way: "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me." So the "more than Me" is not because He is jealous in the sense that your love for your parents is very great. No. "More than Me" tells us that you value them more than you value Him, and that your value is wrong. How can they be more valuable than He? He is morally perfect; they are not. Once you value things in this way, it is clear that your values are wrong. Based on moral meaning, you are wrong. And if you want to persist in that way, you are free to do so but He says, "You are not worthy of Me."

So it is our choice. If we want to value the things of this world more than Him, we are free to do so but recognise: We cannot at the same time say, "I love You, Lord. I will follow You. I will do what You want me to do." We cannot say that. We will end up calling Him "Lord, Lord" and not doing the things that He says, which is so common in Christian lives. We call Him "Lord" very freely but we do not sufficiently ponder over the meaning of what we are saying. If He is Lord, do we then relate with Him as Lord? Will we listen to Him, will we obey Him, will we treasure Him?

We are often more concerned about what our work superior says than what the Lord says. We are more concerned about what our teachers say than what the Lord says. We are even more concerned about what our pupils say than what the Lord says. We are so affected by the opinions of man, by what people say or do; they are more precious to us than the Lord Himself.

So the Lord wants to be clear: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be My disciple." If we really want to be His disciple, we really want to follow Him, we have to deal with these areas in our lives: "carry his own cross".

The Lord Jesus says, "If you want to come after Me, you must deny yourself. You have to carry your cross."

Why deny yourself? What is wrong with the self? There is nothing wrong with the self. God created us. The self is just an entity, a being, a person. Why must we deny ourselves? The Lord is not telling us to say we do not exist, we do not love ourselves, we do not care about ourselves. He is not saying that.

Deny yourself has to do with rejecting the wrong direction in our hearts, where we are preoccupied with ourselves not because of what is good but because we like it, because we prefer it, because we pursue the things of this world. It is a self-seeking life, what many people understand: a selfish life.

The Lord is telling us we must deny this – we must deny this direction in our lives. We must carry our own cross. The cross is a place of death. We must put to death all the desires of the flesh, all the things of this world that we may desire that are not pleasing to God. Are we prepared to do that? If we are not prepared to do that, we cannot be His disciple.

Then you may say, “But there are so many people who are disciples of the Lord who are not doing this.” Well, true. We can be disciples, we can be half-hearted disciples; we can be poor quality disciples – possible. The Corinthians were called saints. The apostle Paul wrote to them, called them saints – the holy ones.

But they were not very holy. In their lives, there was a lot of bitterness, jealousy, envy and strife. The apostle Paul was very disappointed with them. He warned them, he cautioned them. But there was a certain degree of repentance, there was a certain degree of faith, there was a certain degree of following the Lord.

So we can say it is possible to be a poor disciple. But be careful. In that kind of state, we can easily perish, move away from following the Lord in order to follow the world, and He may no longer accept us.

But here, what the Lord Jesus is trying to tell us is what a disciple ought to be.

“If you want to be My disciple, where I can heartily acknowledge you and say, ‘You are My disciple,’ this is what you must do. You must give up all. You must be prepared to follow Me all the way. Then I can say, ‘Yes, you are My disciple.’” Otherwise, though we may be His disciples, He will be very sad for us. He will also feel ashamed of us.

Is that possible? Yes. I see that this is happening very frequently in God’s kingdom. God is very ashamed of many of His children. They are not living the way they ought to. We are to be imitators of God, as beloved children but we are not because of the lack of quality of our being.

So the Lord Jesus went on to give two illustrations. When you want to build a tower, you calculate the cost. When you want to go to battle, you consider, can you make it? Why does He say that?

He wants us to understand. If we want to be His disciple, there is a cost to it. Have we considered? Or we say so happily, “I want to go to heaven. I believe in the Lord Jesus,” and we encourage a lot of people to do that. The Lord says there is a cost to be His disciple. Are we prepared for the cost? Do we calculate, consider, count the cost when things are difficult?

When the things of the world are so attractive, when we cannot get what we want, will we follow Him? When what the Lord wants us to do is so difficult, we do not feel like doing it, will we obey Him? We have to count the cost.

None of us can be His disciple if we do not give up all our possessions. But that is only one aspect. It is every aspect of our life, every area of our lives. What Job went through is just an illustration of the kind of situations that we may have to go through if we really want to follow Him.

And so the Lord ends with this warning: "Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned? It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear." He who has ears to hear, let him hear – these are weighty words, think through carefully.

Salt is good – we are to be the salt of the world. We are to bring meaning to the lives of people; we are to contribute to the well-being of the people in this world. But if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned? It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

The danger is there. If after having come to know the Lord, if after having tasted of His goodness, if after having been rescued from hell, we do not take it seriously, we still go our own way, we still pursue the world, we may lose our taste. The quality of our life may be gone and it may end up being thrown out. Like the branch that does not abide in the vine – broken off, withers, burnt. The danger is there.

God wants us to beware. Do not take it lightly. Do not think that because we have been forgiven of our sins, our future is guaranteed no matter how we live.

God is primarily concerned about the quality of our being, not just to forgive us of our sins, to bring us all to heaven. God wants people of quality, people He can trust, people He can have deep fellowship with, people He can share His heart with, who can work together with Him, with love and devotion, togetherness, not bickering, envious, jealous, grumbling, complaining, with all kinds of selfish desires. It is very taxing on Him. It is something that weighs heavily on Him; it is distressing to Him.

He wants to have fellowship with people who truly love what is good, who are prepared to walk with Him even though it is difficult, who will love the things that are good, who will pursue the path of righteousness. This is what God is seeking for. Are we going to concentrate on this?

The Lord willing, we will consider further this issue. It is a very, very big subject. I can only consider with you some major areas, so that we can appreciate that this is a major theme in the Scriptures and we need to be conscious of this as we read the Scriptures. If we miss this, then we may read the Scriptures in vain. We may pursue the wrong things; we may go the wrong path because this is very central in the heart of God, what He wants to bring about.

So if we want to fulfil the Lord's call in our lives, then we must learn to develop true quality in our being, so that we can walk with God meaningfully in deep fellowship with Him, as we depend on Him for His guidance and enabling, as we then seek to do the things that are meaningful to Him, as we then become a good witness because of the quality of our influence on the lives of others. Bear in mind that bringing the gospel to other people is not primarily the words that you say but it is the life that you transmit.

Let us then come before the Lord and ask Him to help us ponder over our lives: Are we moving in the right direction? Are we concentrating on the right things? Do we really value quality in our being? Will we give it our top priority in our walk with God? Will we ask God to help us to develop, to be the people that He wants us to be, so that when we leave this world, we can rejoice, look forward to heaven and eternity, a time of deep and meaningful fellowship with God and with those who love Him?