

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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YOU ARE SONS OF THOSE WHO MURDERED THE PROPHETS

Matthew 23:29-31

In the past few lessons, we have been studying Matthew 23. We spent quite some time on the seven 'woes,' seven accusations against the scribes and the Pharisees for their failure to live up to their position as guardians and teachers of God's law. Today I would like to return to the last woe and explore the concept of sonship from a biblical perspective. What does the Bible teach about sonship? Let's read Matthew 23:29-31.

Matthew 23:29. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets."

Son of God or son of the devil

Notice the last sentence. 'You are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.' If you continue to read beyond this passage, you will observe that many times, we find this 'father/mother and son relationship.' In v. 33, we have the picture of a serpent and its offspring. The religious leaders, far from being the kind of righteous persons they should have been, had become a brood of vipers. The word 'viper' means 'poisonous snake.' If you are born of a snake, then you are a snake and nothing else. In contrast to this, in v. 37, we find a 'brood' of chicks that would gather under the wings of the hen, i.e., the Lord Jesus. 'How often would I have gathered you, but you would not,' Jesus said to the Pharisees. Of course, vipers would not gather under the wings of a hen. Only the chicks come under the wings of a hen.

The Bible talks about two kinds of people, and everyone belongs to one category or the other. Either you are the sons and daughters of God, sons and daughters of the light. Or you are the sons and daughters of the devil, sons and daughters of darkness.

It is a fact of life that we do not choose our parents. We just happen to be born into a family and we bear the name of that family. In the same way, every person, initially, belongs to the family of the devil. There is a force in this world that makes us to be naturally a son of darkness.

You can compare that to the force of gravity. When you throw something in the air, inevitably that object will fall down. No matter how strong is your arm, the gravity of the earth will pull down every object that is thrown upwards. The spiritual equivalent to the pull of gravity is the pull of sin in our lives. Sin is what causes us to belong to the kingdom of darkness. The Scriptures say that we were

born into a world in which sin is predominant. And because we were born in sin, we are under the power of the devil. So when we are born, we are all born in some way or another as sons of darkness. We do not have a choice.

But there is a good news. And that is the good news that the Bible proclaims. The good news is that though we were born in sin, though we may be born as sons of disobedience, we do not have to remain in that family. We do not have to remain sons of the devil. We can accept to be adopted by God and therefore to become His sons.

This choice is what we mean by faith in the Bible. The act of faith is the choice we make when we say, 'I don't want to be in sin anymore. I don't want to be in darkness anymore. I don't want to be a son of the devil anymore. God has given me a choice. He has invited me to be His son. And I want to accept His invitation. I want to be His son.' That is what it means to become a Christian.

Like father, like son

This brings us to consider the nature of sonship in the word of God. How does the Bible define sonship? I would like to say right from the start that sonship in the NT is not merely a matter of status. Sonship in the Bible is a matter that finds expression in our conduct, in what we are and how we behave. We often think of sonship as a status, as a position. We tend to think for example that because I am the son of a particular person, I have automatically access to that person, regardless of the context, regardless of my behavior. This is not sonship in the biblical sense. In the Scriptures, sonship is tied up inseparably to conduct. If our conduct and our thinking do not correspond to the character of God, then we are simply not His sons. This is the point I want to emphasize in this lesson. Sonship, from a biblical perspective, means likeness of character, likeness of thinking, likeness of conduct. It is much on the lines of the expression, 'Like father, like son.'

Having said this, let's look at the evidence of this statement in the word of God. We will take a few examples. Let's begin with Matthew 5:44-45.

*Matthew 5:44. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (notice carefully the words in the next verse)
45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...*

'I say to you, Love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be...' That your conduct may correspond to that of your Father. That you may be seen to be as a son of God. That you may show that you are a son of God. Otherwise you will be a son in name only.

Everybody can say, 'I'm a son of God.' If you think you are a Christian, if you think you are a son of God, there is nothing to stop you from thinking and saying it. But it is up to God to decide whether or not He accepts you as a son. The ones that He will recognize as His sons are the people who have His likeness in character. A son must be in the likeness of his father. You cannot be a true heir, a son of the heavenly Father, when you do not have His likeness.

You would do what Abraham did

Let us continue the discussion along the same lines. We will look at John 8:37-44. Here the Pharisees thought that they were sons of God. But Jesus said that they were not sons of God. Why did He deny it? Look at this passage.

John 8:37. I (Jesus) know that you are descendants of Abraham (physically, according to the flesh, they are the descendants of Abraham); yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you.

38 *I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.*" (Notice the distinction between 'my Father' and 'your father.' What is the difference? Jesus will tell them).

39 *They answered him, "Abraham is our father."* Jesus said to them (observe very carefully His statement), *"If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did* (notice the principle here. If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did. Sonship is defined in terms of conduct. Likeness of action. Likeness of behavior.),

40 *but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did.*

41 *You do what your father did."* They said to him, *"We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God."* (God is our Father. We are the sons of God. That is what they wanted to maintain.)

42 *Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but He sent me.*

43 *Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.* (Now notice who is their father)

44 *You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

This is a very important passage. The religious leaders were saying, 'We have one Father, even God. God is our Father. We are sons of God.' Jesus said, No, you are not.' Why not?

We think of sonship as having some kind of physical relationship. We are born of two parents, a father and a mother. We are this couple's son. But the Bible does not quite understand it in this way. The mark of sonship in the Scriptures is the way you conduct yourself. It has to do with your attitude and your actions. That was the basis of Jesus' declarations in v. 39 and v. 42. 'If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did.' 'If God were your Father, you would love Me.'

Why are we sons of the devil? It is because we do what the devil does. And what does the devil do? He sins. He lies. He is self-centered.

The Bible tells us that the mark of sonship is that a son does what the father does. It is not just that he has some kind of physical connection to the father or that he claims that he is the son of so and so. I repeat. Sonship, in the Bible, has to do with likeness of character and conduct.

If I claim to be a son of God, but I don't behave like a son of God, I don't behave as Jesus behaved, then I am a hypocrite. I am a liar. I don't speak the truth. That is why Jesus called the Pharisees 'hypocrites.' They were not speaking the truth. They said they were sons of God but they did not behave like sons of God.

A radical change

In Matthew 23:33, the Lord Jesus said to the Pharisees, 'You are serpents and you are the offsprings of serpents.' The devil is a serpent. He is pictured as a serpent because of his deceitfulness, his poisonness, his corruption, his inclination to harm other people. When Jesus called them 'serpents,' he was not insulting them. He was telling them, 'That is your condition. And unless you are changed by God, unless you become a new person, unless your nature is changed, you will die.' That is why in the same verse, he said, 'How shall you escape being sentenced to hell?' 'Unless your inner character is completely changed, you have no way to escape from hell.'

This is something we cannot do by our own strength. We need God's power. At the beginning of the lesson, I compared sin to gravity. It pulls everybody down and causes us to belong to the devil's kingdom. When we have faith, God gives us the power to overcome the gravity of sin. God's power is like a rocket that lifts us up, out of the sphere of influence of sin. It enables us to become children of

God and to function as children of God. The things that by nature I cannot do, I find myself doing, by God's power.

Let's read another passage. 2Corinthians 6:17-18.

*2Corinthians 6:17. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, 18 and I will be a father to you, and **you shall be my sons and daughters**, says the Lord Almighty."*

God tells us what kind of people He will call His sons. It is the people who come out of sin, out of the bondage of sin. They do not have anything more to do with unclean things. It is to these people that God will say that He will be their Father, and they will be His sons.

You see, sonship involves a radical change of lifestyle, of attitude. It has to do with a new mentality. This is also seen in Matthew 5:9. Jesus said this.

*Matthew 5:9. Blessed are the peacemakers, for **they shall be called sons of God**.*

The peacemakers are the sons of God. Here sonship is connected with a certain type of attitude and behavior, namely those who make peace, who bring blessings to other people, who bring together the injured parties.

Self-justification

Now there is a question that I would like to discuss in connection with our passage in Matthew 23. The question is this. Why do people do the very thing that they say they would not do? Why did the Pharisees do the very thing that they did not think they would do? Let's read again Matthew 23:29-30.

Matthew 23:29. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.

'We would not have taken part with them in killing the prophets. Yes, our fathers killed the prophets. We have to admit that. But we would have never done such a thing.' Really? That is exactly what they did. They did the same thing to John the Baptist, to Jesus and to the apostles (cf. 34).

How is it that they did the very thing they said they would not do? Were they dishonest? Were they misguided? Were they blind?

I do not think that the religious leaders were completely untruthful. I do not think that they said, 'We don't kill the prophets,' and then, they went ahead and did exactly that. My guess is that when they killed those people, they thought that they were not real prophets. In fact, they probably thought that in getting rid of them, they were doing God a service.

In order to keep it simple, I will narrow down this issue to one practical point. And it is this: the sinner has the tendency of justifying himself when a wrong has been pointed out.

When God questioned Adam about the fruit that he ate, he did not say, 'Lord, I'm sorry. I sinned. I ate the fruit that you told me not to eat.' He said, 'It's Eve. She gave me the fruit. So I ate it.' What was Eve's response? 'It's the serpent. He tricked me. So I ate.'

'Killing the prophets? What prophets? They were not true prophets. Jesus is not a prophet. In fact, he is a blasphemer. He claims to be a king, the king of the Jews. Therefore He deserves the death penalty.' That is how the Sanhedrin presented Jesus to Pontius Pilate.

Self-justification. If a person keeps doing it, soon he will not be able to tell right from wrong. He has spent a lot of energy trying to explain the wrong to be right that he has convinced himself that he is right when he is actually wrong. He has so deceived himself that he cannot tell black from white and white from black. He cannot distinguish truth from falsehood, and falsehood from truth.

In Isaiah 5:20, we read this.

Isaiah 5:20. Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!

You see, they have changed everything around. Light is darkness; darkness is light. Sweet is bitter; bitter is sweet. They confounded the distinction of right and wrong. How do you come into such a state? Self-justification is one way.

The Bible teaches that there are people who think they are sons of God but in reality they are not sons of God because they do not bear the fruit of holiness. Their behavior does not match what they claim to be. 'By their fruit, you will know them,' Jesus said (John 15:8). But these people, like the Pharisees, truly believe that they are sons of God. How can they believe that and not have the proper behavior? Somewhere down the road, they will have to justify their actions. They have to call right, what is actually wrong. They have to 'call evil good.' And they become convinced by their own reasoning.