“Not concerned with echoing clichés on biblical texts, MacArthur digs deeply—deep into the original languages, deep into the text itself—and then expounds with clarity and courage what he finds in the text.”

R. C. SPROUL, President, Ligonier Ministries; Senior Minister of Preaching, St. Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, Florida

“MacArthur has always taken great pains to give the historical and scriptural context behind each verse, reminding the believer that every noun and verb in the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit to call us to a holy and obedient life. I’m excited that this collection includes some of his best work!”

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“The sheer genius of MacArthur’s preaching lies in his mastery of Scripture combined with his rare capacity to communicate it with great clarity and convincing power.”

STEVEN J. LAWSON, Senior Pastor, Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, Mobile, Alabama

“MacArthur has set the benchmark for diligent study, careful exegesis, and faithful exposition, and all of us are encouraged by his example.”

ALISTAIR BEGG, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

“This collection of the ‘best of the best’ messages from MacArthur should be in the hands, heart, and mind of every serious student of God’s Word.”

JAMES MACDONALD, Senior Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel; Bible Teacher, Walk in the Word

“Those who have benefited from MacArthur’s long expository ministry know that it flows from his unflinching commitment to the sovereign authority of the text—and that it is the preacher’s job to get out of the way and let the Word do the work. These expositions are touchstones for all who would faithfully preach God’s inerrant Word!”

R. KENT HUGHES, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

JOHN MACARTHUR is the pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, and president of the Master’s College and Seminary. Heard daily on the national radio program Grace to You, he is the author of many best-selling books, including The MacArthur Study Bible, The Gospel According to Jesus, and The Truth War.
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February 9, 2009, marked John MacArthur’s fortieth anniversary as pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California. John actually began preaching during his college years exactly a decade earlier, so 2009 also marked his fiftieth anniversary as a preacher.

The first sermon John preached as a college student wasn’t recorded. It wasn’t delivered in a church, either, but in the open air. John was part of a student gospel team doing music and evangelism. The team leader dropped him off at a bus depot in Spartanburg, South Carolina, telling him his assignment was to gather a crowd and preach. It was an awkward assignment for which John was completely unprepared.

“The sermon was terrible,” he says. “I didn’t know how to do it right. I went in there—had my Bible in my hand—and I walked in to this mostly-empty bus depot. And I’m looking around this motley bunch and so I just started preaching a gospel message. You could just see people looking at me saying, ‘The poor kid! He looks intelligent. It’s so sad; he must have some kind of disability.’

“And I thought, You know, this doesn’t make any sense at all. So I did it for about ten minutes and then I walked out the door and I went down the street where there was a high school dance beginning—and I just sat outside and gave the gospel to kids as they went in and out. That’s how I got my start preaching. It wasn’t memorable at all. But after that I was eager to learn to preach, because I was determined to be ready whenever I was called on to preach. I would go to rescue missions and military bases to preach when I could. Over time, I learned how to connect with an audience.”
Indeed, John’s preaching is and always has been the mainstay and strength of Grace Church. His great skill as a communicator and his commitment to the hard truths of Scripture are evident from the very first sermon he preached. Already an excellent preacher and a precocious student of Scripture in 1969, John has applied himself with unflagging diligence for the past forty years. His preaching today reflects a maturity and depth that few in that bus depot could have even imagined. Late-twentieth-century American evangelicalism, best known for flashy techniques and market-driven messages, has produced no other expositor whose breadth and depth even comes close to that of John MacArthur. In fact, forty years (and counting) of faithful, verse-by-verse exposition of the New Testament put John MacArthur in the rarefied company of truly great names like John Calvin, Thomas Manton, Stephen Charnock, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. What makes John’s unique ministry even more notable is that he has remained at the task—and his influence continues to be felt worldwide—while the vast majority of well-known preachers in the evangelical mainstream have chased popular culture’s fads, becoming more and more trivial and superficial in a mad quest to seem “relevant.”

Biblical exposition will still be truly relevant if the world lasts another millennium or longer. What seems fashionable today will be embarrassing tomorrow. If you don’t believe it, read your junior high yearbook.

The sermons we have collected here prove how timeless preaching can be when it is merely sound, clear, biblical exposition. These messages span the past forty years of John MacArthur’s ministry at Grace Community Church. They reflect a clear pattern of spiritual growth and increasing skill in delivery, but even the earliest of these sermons is just as powerful, insightful, convicting, and substantial—as potent as it was in 1969. That people are still listening to those earliest sermons is more proof of how well the messages stand up over time. And we still broadcast them regularly on “Grace to You” radio. (Later this we did broadcast “How to Play Church” once again.)

In assembling this collection, we were faced with an embarrassment of riches. We did a survey of favorite sermons among pastors, staff peo-
ple, and longtime listeners. The original list we assembled included dozens of titles. Faced with strict page-count limitations, we knew we would have to cut some of our own favorite sermons from the final list. So we want to stress that this is merely a small sampling of John MacArthur’s best-known and most important messages. We’ve tried to choose sermons we know have been instrumental for bringing many people to Christ and completely revolutionizing hearts and lives.

As John himself would point out, the power of a great sermon does not belong to or emanate from the preacher. “The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12, emphasis added). All truly great preaching starts with that recognition. Preachers who rely solely on their skill, technique, or creativity may sometimes appear “successful” when the only measurement is human applause. But if the aim of preaching is the awakening of spiritually dead souls and the cleansing and transformation of lives spoiled by sin, then all that really counts is that the preacher be faithful in proclaiming the Word of God with clarity, accuracy, and candor. His people must also be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

By that measure, the past forty years at Grace Community Church have been a truly remarkable era. We’re blessed to have been part of it. Our prayer is it is just the beginning of a much longer era.

This book was assembled entirely without John MacArthur’s knowledge, as a surprise to him, to honor him on his golden anniversary in ministry and his fortieth year as pastor of Grace Community Church. May it be used by the Lord to extend the reach of these sermons further than ever. May God also grant us many more years under John’s ministry, and may this church continue to be a faithful beacon of light, proclaiming the Word of God for many generations to come.

—Phil Johnson
Executive Director
Grace to You
If you listen to a recording of this sermon, you’ll hear a noticeably younger (and higher pitched) John MacArthur. What’s most amazing about this message, however, is its content. Virtually every major theme that has dominated John’s preaching and writing for the past forty years is here—the importance of understanding the gospel correctly, the danger of spurious faith, the absolute authority of Scripture, and the folly of elevating either human reason or personal feelings over the plain truth of Scripture. The whole “lordship controversy” is also here in microcosm, and the sermon is delivered fearlessly and unapologetically in John’s distinctively candid but winsome style.

Temperatures were mild across Southern California on the Sunday John began his pastorate at Grace Church. Local newspapers reported that 85,000 Californians flocked to the beaches that day. Across most of the nation, however, the weather was terrible. A snowstorm and record low temperatures shut down the east coast from New York to Washington. Richard Nixon, still in his first term as U.S. president, was vacationing that weekend in Key Biscayne, Florida. Since the weather was balmy in Florida as well, the president decided to delay his return to Washington and attended a community church in the Florida Keys that Sunday. That was the only community church that attracted any national attention that week. But some three hundred people squeezed into the chapel at Grace Church to hear the new pastor. It was an unforgettable Sunday for those who were there.
Turmoil over the war in Vietnam had been brewing in America for at least four years. Student unrest was becoming commonplace, especially in California. Recreational drug use was at an all-time high in California’s youth culture. In August of that year, exactly a week before the Woodstock Music Festival began in upstate New York, Charles Manson and a band of young people he had recruited would go on a murderous spree in a Los Angeles-area canyon, filled with celebrity homes, less than ten miles due south of Grace Church.

That’s the kind of culture into which John MacArthur began unleashing God’s Word—one verse at a time. But just as we see in the book of Acts, “the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly” (Acts 6:7).

* * *

I want to look at Matthew 7:21–23 and talk about “How to Play Church,” or how the false church becomes incorporated within the true church: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

Matthew 13 tells us that the church age is going to be strange. In Matthew 12:22–31 the Pharisees and those connected with them had committed the unpardonable sin of attributing to Satan the works of Christ. Jesus said He could forgive them for anything but not that. In other words, it was as if He was saying, “If you’ve seen all the things I’ve done, if you’ve seen all the miracles and heard everything I’ve said, and all you can conclude is I do them by the power of Satan, you’re beyond the possibility of believing. If you’ve received all this revelation and haven’t accepted it, there isn’t any more you can have. To follow Me, to see Me, to watch Me, to listen to Me and conclude it’s satanic puts you out of the possibility of belief.”

The church age is the subject of Matthew 13. Having set Israel aside because of her unbelief, Christ begins to institute parables that describe the unique nature of the church age. He says that in
How to Play Church

the church age there are going to be wheat and tares, which are the true and false believers. They’re going to be so hard to tell apart that you won’t be able to choose until God, who is the final judge, decides between them.

Jesus then discusses the various dimensions of the church. The mustard seed illustration gives the idea that the church will explode in great numbers, but will include the real and unreal, true and false believers.

The church age is going to be a very strange era and truly it is now. Under the name “church” today there are all sorts of variety. Christ commanded John in Revelation to write to the Sardis church, “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Rev. 3:1). What a commentary on most churches today! They have a title, they have a name, but they’re dead. Why are they dead? They’re dead mainly because the people in them are dead. It would be safe to say the great majority of church members in America today don’t even know what it is to be a Christian because they’re dead spiritually. Paul said in Ephesians 2:1, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins.” Consequently, dead people are going to constitute a dead church. The church is not suffering or dying today because of attacks from the outside; Satan doesn’t need to waste time on them—the people are already dead on the inside.

But on the other hand, a living church—a church that knows Jesus Christ and proclaims His gospel—is always going to be under attack because that kind of a church will be the conscience of the community. Jesus said, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you” (Luke 6:26). The church must always be at opposite poles with the world because light and darkness have no fellowship with each other. “What harmony has Christ with Belial” (2 Cor. 6:15)—there’s no relationship.

This is very important to understand. Paul elucidates it in 2 Corinthians 6:14 where he says the love of Christ is a basic issue. The church’s priority is to be the vessel through which God is making new creations out of these spiritually dead people. A church that is real, living, and vital is communicating the gospel to dead people, and the gospel alone can make them alive. That’s the mission of the church.
There is no way biblically that the church can ever court the world. The church must be the conscience of the world. The church must be so well defined in fulfilling its role that it becomes the antagonist of the world. For those outside of Jesus Christ, the pew in the church should be the most uncomfortable seat in the world because we present a gospel that divides. But when the church courts the world, it dies—the Sardis church thought it was alive but it was courting the world, so it wasn’t alive, it was dead (Rev. 3:1).

The duty of the church is not only to teach saints but also to warn men of God’s standards. We are not being fair or faithful to the call of God if all we do is advertise the abundant life. Now that’s a great dimension of salvation, but at some point we’ve got to proclaim that man is a sinner, that he’s separated from a holy God, and that in the eyes of God he’s an object of God’s judgment—he’s a child of wrath, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:13. To boldly proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ and the truth about man in his sin is to divide. In Matthew 10:34–36 Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household.”

The true church of Jesus Christ is not a religious institution that welcomes everyone; it is the body of Jesus Christ set apart to God, uniquely married and wedded to Christ, and redeemed by faith. No one outside of that redemption can be a part of it. The requirement for the church and our task as a people is to warn those who have not received Christ, to warn them in love but to warn them nonetheless that they are in danger of the terror of the Lord. This is our task.

Our text is a warning to those who think they’re comfortably entrenched in the church but who in reality are not. This is not a warning to people outside the church. This is a warning to us who are involved in the church to be sure we are real. I think it only fair that as we begin our ministry here we stop and approach this truth with a sense of sobriety and earnestness, to understand how we stand as individuals in the view of God right now.
How to Play Church

I’m sure that in this church are people who do not know Jesus Christ in a personal, vital way. I am convinced of that because of the size of the congregation this morning. There are some sitting right here in this audience who have come to church many times but who do not know Jesus Christ. Perhaps they even have religious sensations and perhaps they even have sanctimonious emotions, but they do not know Jesus Christ. It is my conviction that before we as a church can move together as a body, we must become a unit. The only way we can ever be united and become one as Christ prayed we might is when we all are real in Christ. So I want us to carefully examine our lives.

Notice the scene in Matthew 7:22 and the phrase “on that day.” That’s important because it is a reference to a particular day that is coming when Christ is going to judge. The idea of “on that day” in the Bible is connected with judgment, and this is a picture of that day. A similar reference to “the day” appears in 1 Corinthians 3:13 in connection with the time of the judgment of believers. It appears frequently in various places in the Bible in connection with divine judgment of unbelievers (cf. Isa. 2:12; Joel 2:1; Mal. 4:5; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10).

There is coming a day when God is going to judge. There is coming a day when the Great White Throne is going to be a reality. Revelation 20:11–12 paints this great picture of final judgment: “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.” In other words, they had no faith to commend them—all they could base their lives on was their works. If you know anything about that you know the Bible says, “By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Rom. 3:20). “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake
of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:13–15).

In Matthew 7:21–23 we are taken to the final judgment. We are at the Great White Throne seeing some of the people who are confronting Christ at that time. They are saying to Him, “Lord, Lord, here we are, we are the ones who were the religious people.” Peter calls this day “the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet. 3:7). The phrase “ungodly men” may seem difficult in view of the fact that these are religious people. There is an awesome silence at this judgment.

THE CONDITION FOR ENTRANCE TO THE KINGDOM

Then the silence is pierced by the words of Jesus Christ, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Here we have, first of all, the condition for entrance to the kingdom.

What is that condition? How do men enter the kingdom of God? How can they be in a vital relationship with God? Well, first of all, it’s not the ones who say, “Lord, Lord”—it’s those who do the will of God who enter. Matthew 25:1–13 is a very interesting story of ten virgins invited to a feast. Five of them came and had prepared beforehand by bringing oil and having it in their lamps. The other five were foolish and did not prepare. In Matthew 25:11 the door is shut and the five left on the outside say, “Lord, lord, open up for us.” But the Lord of the feast says, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.”

The virgins were all invited to the feast—they had heard the gospel, in a sense, symbolically. They had heard the proclamation, “Come to the feast.” This is an illustration of God’s call to the world. They were prepared to the extent that they had their lamps. They even had the right clothes on. They even arrived at the meeting house. But they didn’t get in. Their cry is similar to Matthew 7:21, “Lord, lord, open up for us.” But He says it is not those who say, “Lord, Lord,” but those who do His will.

What a solemn warning! At the end of that parable Christ says,
“Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour” (Matt. 25:13).

Hosea illustrates this in Hosea 8:2. Hosea’s people were just about at the bottom historically. Israel had hit the skids and by the time you get to Hosea’s prophecy, he is ranting and raving about their lack of knowledge, saying, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (4:6). He says that they don’t have any reality on the inside. He likens them to the early morning dew that evaporates (6:4). They don’t have any substance. They have neglected and forsaken God. They don’t even go near the house of God.

By the time you come to 8:1–2, Hosea paints the picture of a vulture. (It’s translated “eagle” but it’s the Hebrew word for vulture.) The image is a vulture swooping over the house of God. And it symbolizes the fact that with all the religious activity in Israel, the real truth was that the place was dead and that’s why the vulture was swooping over it. There was nothing there but a dead carcass. Israel forsook God’s temple as the symbol of her relationship to Him and instead she became a tragedy—a picture of a flying vulture testifying to the fact that judgment was coming. Hosea goes on to prophesy that Israel will be crushed because of her neglect of God.

Israel was still religious. Israel still had religious feelings. The people still went through some of the motions, but they were dead. There was no reality to their religion, only a formality. What do they say in response to Hosea? “My God, we of Israel know You.” It’s just like Matthew 7:21, “Lord, Lord, it’s us. What do You mean by judging us; we know You, it’s us. My God,” they cry out, “it’s us.” What a tragedy. But God doesn’t know them. That particular generation of people had set aside their relationship with God as a result of their own desires.

You can see that it’s not those who wish to enter the kingdom who get in necessarily. It’s not even those who ask to enter that get in. It’s not enough to ask; it’s not enough to wish; it is enough to be obedient. God has set up certain rules for entrance to the kingdom; they must be obeyed or there is no entrance. You may want to enter to such a degree that you come to church and you get involved, but not too involved. Unless you come by way of Jesus Christ, you cannot enter. All your
religious activities and all your rituals are meaningless. Peter said in Acts 4:12, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” There is no other name other than Jesus Christ.

There was a blind man on a bridge in London. He was reading his Braille Bible. And as he was reading in Acts 4:12, he lost his place with his fingers. Being oblivious to anyone around him because of his blindness, he kept running his fingers over the same phrase, “No other name . . . no other name . . . no other name.” A group of people who had gathered around him as he stumbled over the words began to mock him and laugh at him as he fumbled with his Bible. There was another man standing on the edge of the crowd, not mocking but listening. That man walked away that night, went home, fell on his knees, and invited Christ into his life. Later he testified in a meeting that what brought him to Jesus Christ was a blind man on a bridge stumbling over the words, “No other name . . . no other name . . . no other name.”

It is only through personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that you or I or anyone will ever enter the kingdom of God. We can’t enter through our religious emotion or our sanctified feelings. It is only through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Lip profession is no good—there must be obedience. And in the statement, “Lord, Lord,” you get the idea that these people are surprised—in fact they’re shocked. “You mean we’re not even getting in?” But remember what Jesus Christ says in Luke 6:46, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”

The following verse is on an old slab in the cathedral of Lübeck, Germany: “Thus speaketh Christ our Lord unto us, ye call Me Master and obey Me not, ye call Me Light and see Me not, ye call Me Way and walk Me not, ye call Me Life and desire Me not, ye call Me Wise and follow Me not, ye call Me Fair and love Me not, ye call Me Rich and ask Me not, ye call Me Eternal and seek Me not, ye call Me Gracious and trust Me not, ye call Me Noble and serve Me not, ye call Me Mighty and honor Me not, ye call Me Just and fear Me not; if I condemn you, blame Me not.”
God has established the requirement for entrance to the kingdom of heaven. It has nothing to do with a building; it has everything to do with Jesus Christ. Calling Christ “Lord” or anything else is not enough; doing the will of God is the answer.

You say, “Well what is the will of God?” Paul told Timothy that “God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4). That’s the will of God. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). That’s God’s will. In John 6:40 Christ says, “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I myself will raise him up on the last day.” John 1:12 says, “But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God.” God’s will is for you to receive Christ. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him,” and that means faith in Jesus Christ. You don’t get into the kingdom by sincerity, by religiosity, by reformation, by kindness, by service to the church, not even by simply naming the name of Christ; you get there only by personal trust and faith in Christ.

THE CRY OF THOSE REFUSED ENTRANCE TO THE KINGDOM

Now look at the cry of those refused entrance in Matthew 7:22: “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” The cry of the people is an outburst. When Christ in judgment says that not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord,” is in, suddenly there’s an outburst—a plea from the hearts of those people. They cry out and say, “But we’ve done all these things.” Many people are going to hell, eternally disappointed because they thought their religious performance was enough to save them.

Millions of people depend on their morality, their good deeds, their baptism, their church membership, even their religious feelings. There will be many church workers in hell, many pastors, and sad to say, many teachers in so-called religious schools. I’m sure many of them are going to say to Christ, “Christ, it’s us, we prophesied in Your
TRUTH ENDURES

name.” But Jesus will tear off the sheepskin and lay bare the ravening wolf. That’s exactly what He’s been talking about in Matthew 7:15–20, where He reveals the false prophets—those who claim to have reality and have it not.

Luke 13:25–30 adds tremendous weight to this point: “Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open up to us!’ then He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets’; and He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.’ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out. And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.” What a picture of that same day—of those who are cast out because all they had was the name of Christ without the reality of faith in Him. How sad to see them outside crying to gain entrance.

I’m reminded of the people in the days of Noah who must have been doing much the same thing. They were banging on the doors of the ark trying to let Noah know they finally believed what he said was true. They wanted to come in but they could not.

Do you have only a form of godliness? Do you know the Lord personally? Do you see yourself at the Great White Throne with your feeble excuses? Jesus told Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). What does it mean to be born again? It simply means receive Jesus Christ and believe God to make you a new creation, born eternally into His family.

When Nicodemus came to Christ he had a lot to commend himself for. He was a religious man; he was the teacher in Israel. You would think with all the religious steps he had taken, Christ would have said, “Nicodemus, you’re such a great guy, you’ve gone so far, you’ve had such a fantastic life, you’ve done many wonderful things, all you need to do is take one more giant step and you’re in.” But Christ was really
saying, “Nicodemus, you’ve done everything there is to do religiously. Now forget it all, go back and be a baby—be born all over again.” He didn’t need to take another step in the process; he had to start from the beginning.

THE CONDEMNATION FOR THOSE WITHOUT CHRIST

To cry out in protest to God is a useless defense, isn’t it? The will of God is to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. And those who haven’t done so cry out in horror. Then the Judge speaks again in Matthew 7:23 and we see the condemnation of those without Christ: “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

“Profess” is an interesting word; the Greek word for it (homologia) means “to openly proclaim.” Here Christ openly proclaims that He does not know them. That same word is used in Matthew 10:32, where Jesus says, “Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.” If you’re not willingly, openly proclaiming Christ here on earth, then He will not openly proclaim you in heaven. Instead He says, “I never knew you.”

Now we come to one of the most important concepts in all of Scripture, represented by the word “know.” From time to time you might find me repeating this concept because it’s so critical. What does it mean for God to know someone and not know someone else? We know that doesn’t mean He’s not aware of people. We know He’s not saying, “I don’t know who you are.” He knows who everyone is. He numbers the hairs of everyone’s head; He knows when a sparrow falls (Matt. 10:29–30). He knows everything there is to know.

So what does Christ mean when He says, “I never knew you”? Second Timothy 2:19 gives us the key: “The Lord knows those who are His.” What does that mean—what is he trying to say? The word “know” in Scripture implies a unique love relationship. In Amos 3:2 God says, “You [Israel] only have I chosen [lit., “known”].” Now is Israel the only nation God knew about? No, He knew about every nation. What was He saying? He was saying, “I have an intimate relationship with Israel.”

In the Old Testament the concept of a man and a woman coming
together in a relationship that produces a child is spoken of as a man “knowing” his wife. For example, Genesis 4:17 says, “Cain had rela-
tions with [lit., “knew”] his wife.” We don’t assume he knew his wife
in the pure sense of just knowing her—that’s obvious or he wouldn’t
have married her in the beginning if he hadn’t known her in that way.
It has to be more than that. The verse goes on to say, “She conceived,
and gave birth to Enoch.” In other words, to “know” refers to the most
unique human love relationship possible.

You may remember that the Bible says that Joseph had not known
Mary (cf. Matt. 1:18, 25). That’s what shook him up so much when he
discovered Mary was pregnant. He had a choice of either stoning her
or putting her away properly because she was pregnant and he had
never known her. The word “know” in a human realm implies a unique
love relationship between two people. In terms of God’s relationship,
the same thing is true. Paul says in Galatians 4:9 that believers are
“known by God.” The beauty of our intimacy with God is that it’s lik-
ened to a man knowing his wife. And that’s what we see in Scripture:
God refers to Israel as his wife (cf. Hosea 1–3) and the church is seen
as the bride and Christ the bridegroom (cf. Eph. 5:25–32).

We have an intimate love relationship with God. It’s illustrated
beautifully for us in the words of Christ in John 10:14, “I am the good
shepherd, and I know My own.” As I read this passage, I’m going to
substitute the word “love” for “know.” “I am the good shepherd, and I
love My own and My own love Me, even as the Father loves Me and I
love the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. . . . My sheep hear
My voice, and I love them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life
to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out
of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all;
and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the
Father are one” (vv. 14–15, 27–29).

Do you see the beauty and intimacy of the love relationship we
have with Jesus Christ? In Romans 11:2 the apostle Paul says, “God
has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.” God predetermined
a love relationship with you if you’re a Christian. In the counsel of
God, by the sovereign act of His will, He foreordained that you should
be a child of God (Eph. 1:4). You have a predetermined love relationship with God just as Israel did, and still does. The intimacy of that love relationship is so beautiful that God speaks of it in the most magnificent of human terms: the consummation of love between a man and a woman. When God says, “I know My sheep”; when Christ says, “I know you,” that means you and I have an intimate love relationship with them. What a glorious thought!

But to those who do not have that love relationship, He says, “I never knew you.” They had no such predetermined love relationship. They had no such relationship as a sheep and a shepherd or as a bride and a bridegroom. To be outside that special love relationship is to suffer His judgment, “Depart from Me.” What a tragedy! Christ reiterates those harsh words at the time of judgment in Matthew 25:41, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.”

How sad it is that the final picture of judgment is a tragic picture of sadness. The unbelieving of all the ages are brought before God, Jesus Christ reiterates the condition for the kingdom, to do the will of God, and they cry out, those who have been separated, “But we’ve done all these things in Your name.” But the Judge speaks finally and says, “You’re condemned because we never had a love relationship.”

Christianity is not a formality. Christianity is not a religion—it is a personal love relationship with Jesus Christ. Do you have that love relationship? Do you know that same Christ?

I close with this illustration. There was an actor at a drawing room function who was asked to recite something for the audience. He stood up and being gracious to his audience said, “I’ll recite anything you would like me to recite.” No one suggested anything at first. But an old preacher who happened to be there, sitting in the back of the room, stood up and said, “I’d like to hear you recite the Twenty-third Psalm.”

Well, the actor was a little shocked at that, but he had made himself available to recite anything that was requested, so he did what the man asked. He happened to know the psalm, so he said he would recite it. He repeated the Twenty-third Psalm with complete eloquence—it
was a masterful interpretation. His diction was beautiful. When he finished, the entire room of people erupted into spontaneous applause.

The actor, figuring he’d get back at the old gentleman for suggesting he recite something from the Bible, said, “Now, sir, I’d like to hear you recite it.” The old gentleman hadn’t bargained for that. But because of his love for Christ he stood up and repeated the Twenty-third Psalm. His voice cracked, it broke, and it wasn’t very beautiful. The interpretation wasn’t really that good either. When he finished there was no applause, but there wasn’t a dry eye in the room.

The actor, sensing his own emotion, stood up and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I reached your eyes and ears, and he reached your heart. The difference is this: I know the psalm; he knows the Shepherd.”
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