

**Pilgrim's Progress (2)  
The Wicket Gate:  
The Burden of Sin**

**Matthew 7:8**

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

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Now we come once again this evening to our series on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and we come to the section of the story that leads us to the Wicket Gate. Our text for this evening...and there'll be a reason why this is the text this evening which will become clear, almost at the end of the sermon, because this is the text that hangs above the Wicket Gate itself. It's the text that's chiseled into the topmost part of that gate, and it's from Matthew chapter seven, and verse eight. But let's read. I'm going to read from verse 7 and 8 of Matthew, chapter seven. But before we read the passage, let's come before God in prayer.

*Our Father, now as we turn our thoughts and our minds, our hearts, to what Your word has to teach us about what it means to be a pilgrim, what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be born again of Your Spirit, what it means to own the name of Jesus Christ and to follow Him all the length of our days, what it means to have our sins forgiven and burdens that have been lifted at Calvary. So instruct us, we pray, and grant now as we read this passage of Scripture from the lips of our blessed Lord and Savior Himself, grant that we might once again read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

This is God's holy and inerrant word:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Last week we left Christian (he's actually at this point still called Graceless; he's not yet a Christian)—and we left him in that part of the journey where he was bolting from the City of Destruction and bolting from his wife and his children and his friends, and he was heading towards the plain and in the direction of a Wicket Gate to which Evangelist had pointed him.

You remember he has put his fingers in his ears so he can't hear the pleadings of his wife and children, and of his friends, to come back home. He's carrying a great burden upon his shoulders, and there's a book in his hands.

## **I. The world is opposed to Christianity.**

Two of his friends, or neighbors, resolve now to bring him back by force, and they are Pliable and Obstinate. And the first thing that we see in this section of the story is Bunyan's attempt to portray worldly opposition to evangelical Christianity, and to experiential religion.

Obstinate represents stubbornness, and an immovable point of view. Pliable is the opposite. He represents fickleness. He represents a readiness to believe anything...anything, that is, except what Evangelist is teaching, anything but the gospel, anything but biblical Christianity.

Let's eavesdrop the conversation a little.

Obstinate is speaking, and he says to Christian, "What are the things you seek, since you leave all the world to find them?"

And Christian responds, "I seek an inheritance uncorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away..." [He's quoting, of course, from I Peter.] "...that is laid up for us in heaven, safe there, to be bestowed at the time appointed on them that diligently seek it. Read it so, if you will, in my book."

And Obstinate says, "Tsk! Away with your book! Will you go back with us or no?"

And Christian says, "No, not I, because I have laid my hand to the plow."

And at this point, Obstinate leaves and goes back to the city, and Pliable continues walking with Christian for a while.

And Pliable says to Christian, "The hearing of this is enough to ravish one's heart, but are these things to be enjoyed? How shall we get to be sharers thereof?"

And Christian says, "The Lord, the Governor of the country, hath recorded that in the book, the substance of which is if we be truly willing to have it, He will bestow it upon us freely."

And Pliable says, "Well, my good companion, glad I am to hear these things. Come on! Let us mend our pace!" [Of course it's easy for Pliable to say that: he doesn't have the great burden on his shoulders that Christian has.]

It's an interesting conversation that Bunyan introduces right at the very beginning of *Pilgrim's Progress* that represents for us something of the opposition of the world to evangelical, gospel Christianity.

Alexander Whyte was a very famous Scottish preacher of the late nineteenth century, and in St. George's Free Church in Edinburgh for a period of about a year or so he gave a very famous set of lectures on the characters from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. And this is what he says about Obstinate... [and you may recognize him or her...]:

“Little Obstinate was born and brought up in the City of Destruction. His father was old Spare-the-Rod, and his mother's name was Spoil-the-Child. Little Obstinate was the only child of his parents. He was born when they were no longer young, and they doted on their only child and gave him his own way in everything. Everything he asked for, he got; and if he did not immediately get it, you would have heard his screams and kicks three doors off. This man is a man who is used to getting his own way. He's used to his own opinions about absolutely everything, and it will take him to the very pit of hell itself. And he will insist, even then, even in the pit of hell, that he was correct for all eternity. He will convince himself that he was correct, and never be given a moment's silence.”

Pliable is described in a very different way.

Pliable was willing to go with Christian for the benefits that Christian describes. He wants the good things. He wants what Christianity offers, but he's not going to be willing to pay the price of self-sacrifice. He wants the good things, to be sure; he wants eternal life; he wants that which, according to Christian, God promises. This man is open to these things. If you were to ask him, ‘Do you want your sins forgiven? Do you want eternal life? Do you want to be a Christian?’ he'd answer, ‘Yes!’ to every single one of them. He will use Christianity because he believes everything. He's typical of many a modern that we come across, who's prepared to believe—no matter what—no matter how self-contradictory, so long as he gets what he thinks he deserves out of it.

Pliable never read the book. He never read the Scriptures. He never read the Bible for himself. He was never burdened. He's not carrying this burden, this guilt of sin upon his shoulders. He therefore never realizes his true condition as one of imminent danger. He just wants the blessings and the privileges, without being prepared to count the cost. He's like the seed in the parable that Jesus tells--the so-called “parable of the soils:”

“But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while. For when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.”

Jesus spoke about Pliable, and no doubt we've met many a Pliable, who want the good things and who want the benefits; but as soon as trouble comes, as soon as tribulation comes, they move away. "Yet hath he not root in himself."

Now in the next section Pliable will indeed be offended; offended because joy is actually not around the corner. What's around the corner is the Slough of Despond, and as soon as Pliable sees that, he marches off home again.

Now, I think Bunyan is addressing modern twentieth, twenty-first century evangelicalism. There's little doubt that many would have notched up Pliable as a true convert, because for a while, for a short season, he goes along with Christian. He's heading in the direction of the Wicket Gate. He's talking about evangelical Christianity. He wants the benefits that the Bible offers, but he's not prepared to count the cost. And when trouble comes, he will be shown for what he actually is: someone who, in the words of our Lord, does not have root in himself.

Bunyan is actually describing easy-believism. He's describing that many Christians can get so easily bamboozled into thinking that just because you show an interest in evangelical, gospel, Bible Christianity for a season, that does not mean that you are truly converted and a child of God. And Pliable certainly is not.

## **II. Conviction of sin can lead to a worse state before it gets better.**

The second thing we see in Bunyan's allegory is his attempt to describe how conviction of sin can actually lead you to a worse state of affairs before it gets better. Without the remedy of the gospel, every attempt to find relief for this burden that Christian has only gets him into deeper trouble.

Obstinate has gone. Pliable and Christian are continuing on their journey until they come to what is called a Slough of Despond. It's in the middle of the plain; at first they don't see it. It's where all the filth of all the cities gathers. It's like a quagmire, it's like quicksand, and they're running along in the middle of the plain and suddenly their feet are held fast in this quicksand.

Now, Pliable, of course, doesn't have a burden on his shoulders, and he is able to extricate himself from this slough very easily; and he's offended! He says to Christian,

"If we have such ill speed at our first setting out, what may we expect twixt this and our journey's end? May I get out again with my life? You shall possess the brave country alone for me." And with that, he gave a desperate struggle or two, and got out of the mire on that side of the slough which was next to his own house. So away he went, and Christian saw him no more."

And that's the end of him.

Christian is stuck in this Slough of Despond, and along comes a character called Help. And Help offers him his hand and pulls him out of this quagmire. Alexander Whyte says of this section:

“In his description of the Slough, Bunyan touches his highest watermark for humor and pathos and power, and beauty of language. When he's stuck in this quagmire, Christian asks Help why this place is not better signposted. And Help says to Christian that this miry slough is such a place as cannot be mended. It is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore it is called the Slough of Despond. For still, as the sinner is awakened out of his lost condition, there arise in his soul many fears and doubts and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together and settle in this place.”

What is Bunyan trying to do here? He's trying to describe to us what happens very often, though not invariably, but what very often happens to a person who is not a Christian; who perhaps in teenage or adult life discovers the gospel, discovers Christianity, discovers the Bible, becomes convicted about their sins, carries this great burden of guilt upon their shoulders, but doesn't as yet know how to get rid of this burden...hasn't yet seen the gospel, hasn't yet appreciated what it means to trust in Jesus only. He's not at the point where he's saying, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.” All that he is conscious of is that he's a sinner, and the more he thinks about it, and the more he tries to fix the problem by himself, the worse it gets...the more conscious he is that he is a sinner, a hell-deserving sinner.

Now, Bunyan isn't suggesting for one moment that every single Christian comes to Christ in exactly the same way. Bunyan himself came to Christ this way, and experienced this burden for his sin and guilt for his sin for well over a year, possibly about eighteen months or so.

Some of you came to Jesus Christ when you were still infants. Some of you never remember a time when you didn't trust in Jesus. Some of you, like Samuel or John the Baptist, were perhaps regenerated in your mother's womb. But what we have here is a typical example of somebody who is converted in their adult life, or their teenage life. And actually what Bunyan is describing here is one of the things the law of God can actually do to a person in this condition. Actually, Paul speaks about it in Romans 7. He speaks about the connection between sin and the law, and he says, “...But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin, by the commandment, might become exceeding sinful.”

Sin drives us to the Scriptures, and what do we see in the Scriptures? We see the commandments of God that say ‘Do this’ and ‘Don't do that’, but the more we

try to do it (the more we try to obey the Ten Commandments), the more we realize how sinful we are; and it's a spiral. And that sin drives us to the Scriptures, and the Scriptures constantly tell us how sinful we are.

And this is a dangerous time. It's a time of great temptation. He doesn't know it yet, but Satan is tempting him now to return home, to give up on Christianity altogether. Appolyon will say to Christian, "It is ordinary for those who have professed themselves His servants after a while to give Him the slip and return to me. Do thou so, too, and all shall be well." And no doubt Satan is whispering in Christian's ear in the Slough of Despond, "Give up on all this evangelical Christianity; give up on what Evangelist is saying, and come back to me."

Christian hasn't yet professed himself to be a servant, but he's heading that way.

### **III. The failure of good works to provide relief.**

Now, the third thing we see in Bunyan's description, in his allegory, is a description of a well-tried means of relief for a burdened conscience. It's the way of morality. It's the way of good works. It is a well-worn road that leads to disaster.

And at this point in the narrative, there enters yet another Character — a character by the name of Worldly-wiseman: a self-righteous moralist, and the greatest of enemies to young converts. He tells Christian that this burden, this conviction of sin, is totally unnecessary. It's an example of how wrong his thinking has become, and he needs to forget all of this nonsense that Evangelist has told him; and instead, he needs to go to a city called Morality, and he needs to introduce himself to a man by the name of Mr. Legality, who is skilled at removing burdens like this one that Christian has.

Now, a little later in the story Evangelist will tell Christian three things that Worldly-wiseman does. First of all, he turns Christian to the wrong path. Secondly, he makes the cross of Jesus Christ odious to him. Instead of making the cross attractive to him as that to which he needs to run, he actually makes the cross odious to him. And thirdly, he suggests a way that in the end can only lead to death. It's the way of works.

Now Bunyan is actually illustrating from his own life at this point in the story. Bunyan by this time was married. He had married a young lady. And having heard a sermon, a sermon that had spoken to him with great power and force, he tries the way of morality in order to relieve his conscience. He tries to keep the commandments of God. He's read in the Scriptures, he's heard from the sermon, that he's a sinner — that he's breaking God's commandments. So what does he do? He does what everybody tries to do at first: he tries to live a better life. He tries to obey the commandments of God. And Bunyan says about himself that he

kept the commandments of God pretty well sometimes, and this comforted him: "I thought I pleased God as well as any man in England."

Bunyan actually says in his autobiography (and I'm speaking, of course, of *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*):

"Thus I continued about a year. Our neighbors did take me to be a very godly man, a new religious man. And indeed, so it was, though as yet I knew not Christ nor grace, nor faith nor hope."

He's a religious man. He's turned over a new leaf. He's started afresh. He's gone to the city of Morality. He's introduced himself to Mr. Legality, but actually, he's only made himself ten times worse than he was in the first place.

Now, so good did Bunyan actually become — John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* — so burdened did he actually become...one of the things he enjoyed doing was listening to the bell ringers at the church in Elstow, a mile or so outside Bedford where he grew up, and he would often go to the church steeple and lean against the steeple and listen to them do this tintinnabulation, the pulling of these church bells. But he was so burdened about his sin that he thought, 'If I stand here, one of these bells will drop and fall on my head and kill me.' So burdened, so guilt-ridden he was.

Well, that's where Worldly-wiseman wants to send Christian, and Christian heeds him. He heads now in the direction of the City of Morality. And when he gets there, he discovers that the City of Morality is set on top on an enormous hill; and on the top of the hill there are lightnings and thunders. (It's of course Mount Sinai that's being described.) Listen to Bunyan describe it:

"So Christian turned out of his way to go to Mr. Legality's house for help. But, behold, when he was got now hard by the hill, it seemed so high; and also that side of it that was next to the wayside did hang so much over that Christian was afraid to venture, for the less the hill should fall on his head. Wherefore there he stood still, and he wot not what to do. Also his burden now seemed heavier to him than while he was on the Way. And there came also flashes of fire out of the hill that made Christian afraid that he should be burned. Here, therefore, he sweat, and did quake for fear."

Some of you can recognize that. Those of you who have been converted in perhaps teenage or adult life, and there was a period when you were under conviction of sin. God spoke to you from His word, from a sermon; perhaps from the words of your parents or a friend. And every which way you turned, you saw something of the holiness and the righteousness of God, and you felt yourself to be a sinner, and if you died you were surely bound for hell.

Well, that's where Christian is: trying to go to the City of Morality and realizing

now that this is not the place to relieve his burden. In fact, his burden is getting heavier. And Bunyan is telling you something, you see, that's at the very heart of the gospel: that by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified.

“Cast your deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet;  
and stand in Him, in Him alone, gloriously complete.”

Not the labor of my hands  
can fulfill Thy law's demands.  
Could my zeal no respite know;  
could my tears forever flow,  
all for sin could not atone.  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

And it's at this point that dear, wonderful Evangelist comes back into the picture again. And there's a sternness about it, and Evangelist says to Christian, “What are you doing here?”

And then, as sometimes happens in *Pilgrim's Progress*, there's a repetition of the story. And Christian relates now the story of what has brought him now to this point; and he falls down at Evangelist's feet, and he says, “Woe is me, for I am undone!” And Evangelist reassures him that there is forgiveness for all kinds of sin: no matter how dark, no matter how great, no matter how heavy the burden is, that there is relief - but it's not in this place. It's not in the City of Morality. It's via the Wicket Gate, and it's via the Cross, and it's via the Tomb.

And Christian begins again now to head in the direction of the Wicket Gate. And finally he comes to this gate, and above the gate are these words: “Knock, and it shall be opened to you.” And he knocks - several times — in earnest now. And a man appears, and his name is Good-will, and he asks him who he is and what he's doing there, and why he has come and what he wants and so on.

Christian says, “Here is a poor burdened sinner. I come from the City of Destruction, and I'm going to Mount Zion, that I may be delivered from the wrath to come. I would, therefore, Sir, since I am informed that by this gate is the way thither, know if you are willing to let me in.” And Good-will says, “I am willing with all my heart.” And he opens the gate. And he opens it, and takes a hold of Christian, and pulls him in, because Beelzebub (who's the captain of a castle nearby) is casting arrows in Christian's direction, and Good-will pulls him in through the gate.

Now, what is this Wicket Gate? Well, let me say at this point, it is Jesus. It is Jesus Christ. There's a complication in the story that will get Bunyan into some difficulty, and there are some great theologians and preachers who criticize Bunyan at this point because he doesn't actually lose his burden. He goes in through the gate, but he still has this burden. Actually, he's going to have this



burden for some time to come, and the Cross, the Tomb, is still a long way off.

People like Spurgeon have criticized Bunyan because he says, you know, he should have got rid of his burden straightaway.

Well, that's a misunderstanding, I think, of what Bunyan's trying to do, and it's also a misunderstanding of seventeenth century theology, because even though I think that Christian is now a Christian and he's a believer, he doesn't yet have assurance of his faith. He doesn't yet fully understand all of the ramifications of what it is that has occurred. He's still, as it were, in belief and in doubt: he believes, but he's saying, 'Help Thou my unbelief!' and he still has many things that he needs to learn before he will get that full assurance of faith and can sing with full gusto, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!"

Well, it may be this evening that you've come to this series because of the interest you have in *Pilgrim's Progress*, but I want to ask you a question this evening. Are you still where Christian was: in the Slough of Despond under the burden and weight and guilt of a broken law, but not yet in assurance of sins forgiven? Then flee, my friend, to Jesus Christ. Go to Him who says to you, "Knock, and it will be opened; seek, and you shall find. Ask, and it will be given to you."

Let's pray together.

*Our gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank you for these beautiful words of our Lord Jesus Christ, to knock and to seek and to ask. And we thank You this evening that we have found in our own experience the truth of those words: that in knocking, You have indeed opened the door; and in seeking, we have indeed found; and in asking, You have indeed given to us more than we ever imagined. Receive our thanks. Draw near to anyone in our midst this evening who may be under conviction of sin, but still not yet a true believer in Jesus Christ. Rescue them, we pray, by the work of Your sovereign Spirit; and hear us, Lord, for Jesus' sake.*

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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